



## **There is no time like the past**

### **Retro between memory and materiality in contemporary culture**

Handberg, Kristian

*Publication date:*  
2014

*Document version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Handberg, K. (2014). *There is no time like the past: Retro between memory and materiality in contemporary culture*. Det Humanistiske Fakultet, Københavns Universitet.



## PhD thesis

Kristian Handberg

# There's no time like the past

Retro between memory and materiality in contemporary culture



Academic advisor: Mette Sandbye

Submitted: 09/05/2014

Institutnavn: Institut for Kunst og Kulturvidenskab

Name of department: Department of Arts and Cultural Studies

Author: Kristian Handberg

Titel og evt. undertitel: There´s no time like the past  
Title / Subtitle: Retro between memory and materiality in contemporary culture

Subject description: A study of retro in contemporary culture as cultural memory through analyses of site-specific contexts of Montreal and Berlin.

Academic advisor: Mette Sandbye, lektor, Institut for Kunst og Kulturvidenskab, Københavns Universitet.  
Co-advisor: Will Straw, Professor, McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

Submitted: May 2014

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## Aknowledgements

This work, and my Phd-project as a whole, has been realized in a fruitful environment of excellent colleagues, informants, and supervisors.

I would like to thank numerous persons at the Institute for Arts and Culture at the University of Copenhagen. It's been an exiting time and inspiring context. I would also like to thank my "former" academic home in Aarhus at the Department of Aesthetics and Communication (as it is currently named – "Kasernen" among friends) for continuous support and sparring. Finally, I have also got a new academic environment at McGill University in Montreal, where I was warmly welcomed at The McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.

It has given me a valuable perspective to participate in networks and conferences. Especially the Danish Network for the Study of Cultural Memory and its organizers Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Frederik Tygstrup should be thanked. And inspiring inputs and friends from, among other places, Oslo, Skopje, Tartu, Boston, and Lund have been a privilege.

In the research "out in the field" I have been welcomed with enthusiasm and generosity, and I would like to thank the various practioners for their help. I hope my work succeeds in representing the dynamics of the field and contributes to the understanding of retro today. From the very beginning, and throughout the study, the incentive for the project has been my own curiosity about the retro phenomenon which, I should be the first to admit, has an element of personal dedication. It is a privilege, but also a challenge, to do research in such a field.

For the making of this dissertation, I would like to thank the following:

My supervisor Mette Sandbye for keeping the project on the tracks and always taking the time, even in the busiest of times in her job as Head of the Department. My co-supervisor Will Straw for inspiring encouragement to study retro in a meaningful way, and happy days in Montreal. For reading and response, I would like to thank Kasper Green Krejberg, Ditte Gry Blandfort Westergaard, Ulrik Eskekilde Nissen and Nikolaj Avlund Michelsen, and Valdis Silins for English proof reading. In particular, I owe Martin Nielsen thanks for English proof reading and comments. For their various contributions to the research of the project, I would like to thank, among others, Andreas Ludwig, Glenn Adamson, Tea Sindbæk, Martin Baake-Hansen, Søren Landager-Høgh, Arild Fetveit, Alex Bittermann, Frauke Wiegand, Roxana Bedrule, Katrine Dircknick-Holmfelt, Peter Ole Pedersen, Nancy Fischer, Anna Bohlin, Staffan Appelgreen, Agus Soewarta, Michael Kjær, Martin Glaz Serup, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, and Teresa Østergaard Petersen. And finally, the most important thanks are to my beloved Ditte Gry and Nora Liv, family and friends.

*Front page photo: The lobby at Ostel. Das DDR Hostel (described in Chapter 6). Press photo.*

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## There's no time like the past: Presenting the project

### The retro age

“There's no time like the past” is the slogan of The Festival of Vintage, an annual festival in York, UK dedicated to “Celebrating Vintage Music, Vintage Fashion & Vintage Life in the 1930's to 1960's”.<sup>1</sup> Given the massive contemporary circulation of the recent past named as *retro*, it seems like the slogan should not be limited to York but could be extended to the whole of Western culture.

While revivals and historicisms are encountered throughout the cultural history of humankind (Egyptologist Jan Assmann dates the first known ‘renaissance’ as the neo-sumerian revival of Sumerian traditions during the Ur III period in the 20<sup>th</sup> century BC (J. Assmann 2011, 18)), the concept of retro is specific to late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. Never has a society been so focused on its recent past – using its material objects, cultural products, customs and practices as a symbolic and aesthetic gesture in the present. It is currently desirable to wear clothing referring to the popular styles of previous decades, bought in expensive boutiques as often as charity shops and high-street chain shops. Homes are filled with “Mid-century modern” furniture as sought-after prestige objects, while wallpapers, kitchenware and children's toys are mass-marketed in retro style. Popular music and movies not only refer to the vast catalogue of styles from the recent past, but recreate them with ever-increasing investment and devotion. And more and more things are being made *retro*: food, make-up, underwear, body styling, holidays and museum exhibits are increasingly offered in retro style. And to unite it all, the retro festival has become a genre in itself, putting on offer all these kinds of practices in an accessible form (see Ill. 2, p. 13).

Retro is happening at many levels. As a concept it is multi-faceted. Historically, retro emerged in the 1970s and gained general recognition in the following decades. Especially in the last few years, the popularity of retro has been immense and has been practiced on many levels in Western culture. An indication of the concept's currency can be drawn from its emergence in the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.festivalofvintage.co.uk/> (accessed September 25th 2013).

Danish mediascape.<sup>2</sup> The word ‘retro’ appears only once before 1990 (in a feature article on café culture in 1985). Through the 1990s it increasingly appears, most often referring to the foreign culture of American movies or music, marking it as an international trend. Then, after 2000 and especially in recent years, its popularity explodes, crossing all media, including local papers and advertisements describing everything from contemporary cultural phenomena to local festivals and a special offer on kitchenware in a local shop. This testifies to the intense fascination of the recent past, and the popularity of - as well as in-depth dedication to - *retro* in contemporary culture. The aim of this project is to analyze this fascination. Given the massive popularity of retro this might seem inexhaustible. But exactly because of this overall presence of retro in our culture, and the still limited amount of focused study on it, I find it necessary to meet the challenge of such a task.

### **The project and its means: Re-reading retro**

My aim is to look at retro as cultural memory. In practical terms, this dissertation reflects my Ph.D. project’s analysis of retro culture as contemporary aesthetics and cultural memory carried out at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen from 2011-2014. In this context, and with my own background as an art historian, this will be an aesthetic and historical study of retro in a form that I would like to call the cultural history of contemporary culture. To explain retro today and its role as cultural memory, I have pursued two site-specific case studies from Montreal, Canada and Berlin, Germany. These original pieces of field research cover North America and Europe and supply the text-based reception studies with in-situ material. As I will show later, such a specified focus has hitherto not been set in studies of retro. The study, thus, has two dimensions in its purpose:

- One *defining* dimension which maps retro in its spatial existence today and which provides a temporal perspective on the cultural history of retro.
- And one dimension which *specifies* the meaning of retro through the examples of specific cases.

Throughout the study, these overall dimensions will be combined as I use the specific cases to approach a general mapping, definition, and understanding of retro. This mapping will show retro as a distinct cultural feature belonging to a specific period. It will underscore the somewhat

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<sup>2</sup> Through search in the Infomedia database covering all Danish newspaper and periodicals. [www.infomedia.dk](http://www.infomedia.dk) through the licence of the University of Copenhagen, September 2013.

overlooked qualities of retro as a historical examination and *musealization* of the recent past, and it will stress the obvious discussion of past and present which retro stages in its role of cultural memory. I will also argue for the need to understand retro in specific contexts that reflect different versions of modernity as they interact with the generally distributed ideas and images through the cultural and commercial circulations characterizing our world.

While retro was recognized and brought into the cultural debate with the emergence of postmodernism at the turn of the 1980s, the academic reception of retro has been somewhat “stuck” at this point, in contrast to the rich contemporary practice of retro (with a few studies making an exception). There has been a tendency to generalize the notion of retro as an undefined matter that needs no qualified introduction, but which we can still judge or comment upon. Commentators and opinion makers worry about retro as a stagnation of culture, and see it as an expression of either the world economy’s boom or its crisis (from Lippard, Jameson, and Baudrillard at the turn of the 1980s to, partly, Reynolds today). The reception of retro has associated it with aspects of postmodernism or with the concept as such. In such cases it has been thrown into deterministic rhetoric such as: *Has everything lost its meaning and become kitsch? Is history a big carnival after its end? And are we no longer able to imagine any future or hopes for a better world?* While I will not deny the relevance of seeing retro in postmodern terms, and I agree on the historical connection of retro and postmodernism, I will emphasize that retro *per se* should not be identified with postmodernity and the rhetoric and debates surrounding it. It should also be emphasized that retro was not solely a 1980s phenomenon, but has been continued and developed to this day, gaining new meanings, forms and a much wider interest. We cannot view all the efforts being invested in retro today as motivated by a *lack* of meaning and value.

There is also a tendency to view retro as a commercialized fetishism of the past, and retro as a marketing ploy from the cultural industry. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, retro is a complex and manifold phenomenon including positions of underground as well as mainstream, and subversive as well as well-adjusted stances towards established structures. Like anthropologist Daniel Miller suggests (Miller 2010), I find it important not to see oppression, exploitation, and commodity fetishism as the only ways to characterize our relationship with our surrounding material culture and cultural practices. While not being blind to the commercialization that retro sometimes implies, I will focus on what else retro has to offer – and indeed, the commercial character is not unique to retro, which, at the end of the day, is a minor player in the economy and

global power structures. Accordingly, I do not base my study on a Marxist methodology or “radical theory”.

To a certain degree, I will challenge the “postmodern” understanding of retro as a totally ironic, endless quotation of the past based on the simulacrum and the annihilation of time, place and space. I will also modify the focus on rhetoric that dominates this perspective, and analyze retro as based on *things*, media objects, and practices. Thus, I will view the many practices known as retro as based on the following three backgrounds:

*Specific pasts:* Retro is always based on a very special era of the modern, recent past and not a general historicity.

*Specific places:* Retro always happens in a specific place and not everywhere at once.

*Specific things:* Retro is always practiced with specific things, old and new, and is not just immaterially engaged.

These premises should emphasize retro as a lived cultural practice involving many factors. Retro is defined in rhetorical nomination and cultural discourses, but it is also about things – about living and engaging with things. I will state that a central incentive for retro is the experience of material objects and of a changing materiality. Besides the material perspective, I will view retro from the perspective of cultural memory: while not being objectively historical or institutionalized in museums, retro is nevertheless a way of dealing with the past which goes beyond individual memory. For the individual, as well as on a cultural level, I will claim that retro works as a critical and affective way of creating a *common, shared past*, and actively remembering the bygone. This condition of cultural memory is achieved through things and practices, in the specific contexts of location and cultural identity.

To show how retro materially unfolds as a memory based culture in specific contexts, I will explore two case studies based on original field research: Montreal, Canada and Berlin, Germany. These cities are recognized as having large systems of retro scenes operative at several levels: from easily accessible shops to more closed underground sites. Furthermore, retro practices engage with the given cultural contexts and reflect upon the site-specific histories that are in these places contested and complex. The Quebecois-Canadian city of Montreal reflects the formation of a modern cultural identity between European and American influences. And the retro culture in

Berlin reflects the divided past of the city and the contested status of GDR culture, which, as such, is the memory, and materiality, of a different kind of modernity than the Western.

### **The structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of retro and its reception, and approaches the study of it. This is carried out in a short and cursory way, since the case studies themselves will explore these subjects in depth. I will briefly introduce the existing body of works on retro and position myself in relation to it. I will also briefly present the related cultural phenomena of kitsch, camp and cult. Each share characteristics with retro, but are nevertheless different and should not be seen as synonymous with the revival of retro and its current use. I will also introduce three especially relevant concepts for the understanding of retro: authenticity, irony and nostalgia. As these are central characteristics of retro and related cultural concepts, it will be useful to have them introduced and delimited before going into the closer examination of retro.

Chapters 2 and 3 will work out a methodological and theoretical background for the study of material culture and cultural memory. As retro is an unruly cultural phenomenon which crosses the borders of traditional distinctions and disciplines, it is necessary to set up a framework for a discussion of approaches and insights gathered from various disciplines. In Chapter 2, this is structured around a) an “object perspective” discussing the study of things, mainly in the material culture tradition, and b) a “culture perspective” where specific notions of culture as well as the general perspective of culture today, are discussed. I will introduce some specific notions and approaches to cultural phenomena that I consider especially useful for understanding retro such as the concept of “scenes,” the circulation of objects in Michael Thompson’s “rubbish theory,” the “social life of things” described by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, and Orvar Löfgren’s analyses of modern material culture.

Chapter 3 gives special attention to the perspective of memory: This includes both the currently popular field of cultural memory studies and the new significance of memory and “present pasts” in the memory and history boom that is recognized in contemporary culture. Here I will also introduce the notion of *musealization* and the *presence theory*, which are both fruitful for an understanding of retro.

Chapter 4 analyses retro’s most popular specific past through a study of how retro has centered on the 1950s, from the very emergence of the term in the early 1970s up to the current



1950s fascination. In this chapter I discuss how the historical 1950s have been mythologized as The Fifties, how a symbolic universe of Fiftiesness has been created, and how different versions and essences have been drawn out of this decade in different cultural contexts. It is suggested that the 1950s form the heartland of retro and that this era has a special position as simultaneously *old* and *new*. This historical case presents the reception history of retro and analyzes how the most central retro mythology has been formed. It thereby offers an important background to the subsequent site-specific cases and contributes to the description of the retro concept.

Chapter 5 moves into the site-specific reading of retro with an analysis of retro culture in Montreal. I will suggest that the context of the city's cultural configuration and the memory of its formative modern history are both present in its contemporary retro practices. A local specificity is sought-after, and specific aspects of the local history seem to be revived in different retro "scenes".

Chapter 6 analyzes the site specific character of retro further through the case of Berlin. In the formerly divided city - which is indeed also marked by its modern history – the GDR past is revived through various practices of "Ostalgie". I will analyze the retro Ostalgie as a search for a local specificity and an examination of a *different modernity*. In this context, I will compare the official musealization and memory politics of the GDR with that invoked by the retro scenes.

Finally, I will conclude by asking – and answering – the general questions: *What is retro now? Who is retro for? Which kind of past and why? And what are we going to expect of retro in the future?*

Throughout all this, I will discuss retro in terms of modern material memory, and thus give an interpretation of retro's sustained popularity in our culture. It is a study of contemporary culture embedded in the perspective of its time: while retro and this study are concerned with a retrospective view of the 1950s and other revived pasts, we are inevitably in the age of retro and cannot have a retrospective overview of the phenomenon of retro itself. On the other hand, this position provides this study with an obvious relevance, and the possibility of reflecting the current perspectives and of doing observations in the contemporary context. I can thus hope for my study to be time-specific in a productive way.



Ill. 1: From *Hus & Hem Retro* No. 4 2013.



Ill. 2: Logo of the Festival of Vintage, York ([www.festivalofvintage.co.uk](http://www.festivalofvintage.co.uk)) and photos from Vintage by Hemmingway Festival (<http://www.vintagefestival.co.uk/>).

## Defining retro and its context

### Retro: suggested definitions

Retro is a “re”-fixed neologism with “revival” as its closest synonym. For centuries, the term only existed as a prefix in words such as retrospective, retroactive, etc. Grammatically, it is an adjective as well as a noun. The British Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary provides the following definition “Retro: using styles or fashions from the recent past.”<sup>3</sup> The American Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines retro as “relating to, reviving, or being the styles and especially the fashions of the past: fashionably nostalgic or old-fashioned.”<sup>4</sup> The same dictionary traces the term’s origin to the French *rétro*, short for *rétrospectif* [retrospective] with its first known use in 1974. The French language council Centre Nationale de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales confirms its appearance in its dictionary in 1974 (but not where). The definition here is: “Retro: that imitates, evokes or promotes manners and fashions of an epoch of the recent past – e.g. “années folles” [the French term for the Roaring 1920s] or the Thirties.”<sup>5</sup>

In the Danish context retro appears in the list of new words in the Danish language in 1979 by the Danish Language Council.<sup>6</sup> The definition was “Nostalgic, that which revive customs, music, theater and fashions from an earlier period.” The word is still not included in the dictionary *Dansk Sprognævns Retskrivningsordbog*. This indicates the still undefined and unclarified status of the word that is also reflected in the sparse academic reception.

Retro is clearly a neologism, first invented in French in the specific meaning of the so-called *mode retro*: a revival of the 1940s look in film and fashion (further described in Chapter 4). It quickly spread to the English language in the 1970s, often not standing alone but as “retro-chic” (Lippard, 1980), “retro-dressing” or “retro-look.” For example, an article in the New York Times in 1979 was titled “Will the “Retro” Look Make It?” (Guffey 2006, 14). Indeed it would, and retro has been a part of the cultural landscape ever since. Since it is present in many places throughout this landscape, retro does not imply ownership or strict definition. There is no retro manifesto or copyrighted brand-ownership. Neither is there a specific subculture or other cultural group to which the word belongs in the same way as “punk,” “hiphop” or “goth.” Especially in recent years, the

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/retro\\_1](http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/retro_1) (online edition, accessed March 2014).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/retro?show=0&t=1377588889> (online edition, accessed March 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Qui imite, évoque ou exalte les mœurs et la mode d'une époque du passé récent (par exemple les « années folles », les « années trente », etc.), <http://www.cnrtl.fr/lexicographie/r%C3%A9tro> (accessed March 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Pia Jarvad: *Nye Ord 1955-98*, Gyldendal 1999.

spread of retro is felt in many areas: from kitchenware in supermarkets to specialized designer shops; from big retro festivals to exclusive clubs and subcultural gatherings; and from established aesthetic fields in contemporary culture such as cinema and rock music to more ephemeral categories such as food, underwear and make-up.

Retro is thus characterized by multiple uses rather than clear definitions. As design historian Elizabeth E. Guffey describes it in her book *Retro. The Culture of Revival* (2006) “retro carries a pervasive, if somewhat imprecise, meaning; gradually creeping into daily usage over the past thirty years, there have been few attempts to define it. Used to describe cultural predisposition and personal taste, technological obsolescence and mid-century style ‘retro’s’ neologism rolls of the tongue with an ease that transcends slang” (Guffey 2006, 9). In her account, starting with the revival of an Art Nouveau-style in 1960s pop culture, Guffey locates retro as “a unique post-war tendency: a popular thirst for the recovery of earlier, yet still modern, periods at an ever-accelerating rate” (Guffey 2006, 8). As such, retro “suggests a fundamental shift in the popular relationship with the past,” as it ignores the remote lore of the Middle Ages or classical antiquity to focus instead on the recent past of Modernity “half-ironic, half-longing,” and with an “unsentimental nostalgia” (Guffey 2006, 10-11) rather than idealism. Retro exposes the modern as past and must thus contain some kind of challenge to the positive views of technology, industry and progress.

As an illustration of retro’s role and cultural context, Guffey mentions the term “retro rockets,” those much talked about brake rockets following astronaut John Glenn’s flight into orbit in 1962. While they were then a symbol of space-age progress without regressive connotations, this use of the term appears to indicate the retro concept’s non-existence at the time. Just a few decades later, such space-age imagery would be prime material for retro cultivation. As Guffey states, “like the retro rockets that introduced the term into public speech in the early 1960s, retro provides a form of deceleration or opposite thrust, forcing us to take stock of our perpetual drive to move forwards in space and time” (Guffey 28). Notably, retro is defined here as part of modern culture while also a reaction against it – a characteristic that will also be central to my analysis. Where Guffey concentrates on drawing out the background of retro through the twentieth century rather than defining contemporary practice of retro, my study will be aimed at the contemporary practices and circulations of retro. To the seminal history of design- and style by Guffey, I will also add the analytical perspectives of materiality and cultural memory, and of course, the site-specific analyses of retro in Montreal and Berlin.

In the book *Retromania* from 2011, the British music critic Simon Reynolds discusses retro tendencies in popular music. He suggests a provisional definition of retro, distinguishing it from other modes of relating to the past:

- 1: Retro is always about the relatively immediate past, about stuff that happened in living memory.
- 2: Retro involves an element of exact recall being based on archived material from the recent past through photographs, music, video etc... This allows precision replication rather than the distortions and mutations that characterized earlier cults of antiquity such as the Gothic Revival.
3. Retro is generally based on the artifacts of popular culture rather than art and high culture. Its “stomping ground isn’t the auction house or antique dealer but the flea market, charity shop, jumble sale and junk shop.”
- 4: The retro sensibility neither tends to idealize or sentimentalize the past, but to be amused and charmed by it. It is a play in the present that use the past as an archive. (*Reynolds 2011, pp. xxx-xxxii*).

According to Reynolds, retro has the “quite specific meaning” of referring to a “self-conscious fetish for period stylization (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation” (op.cit., xii). It is important to state that retro is an unofficial cultural style and a non-historical way of knowing the past. As such, it has tended to be “the preserve for aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors, people who possess a near-scholarly depth of knowledge combined with a sharp sense of irony” (ibid.). But the argument of Reynolds’ book is that this has changed with the exploded popularity of retro in the *retromania age* where retro does not belong solely to specialists but has become a general cultural purview.

I agree with Reynolds’ points of definition as well as his recognition of a new popularity of retro supported by his familiarity with the pop- and subcultural landscape. I will not, however, base my study on a deterministic criticism of “retromania”, and I do not see an assessment of the value of retro as a goal for my project. Furthermore, Reynolds’ book is based mainly on (a study of) popular music, whereas my study is not limited or defined by the field of music.

A few examples of workaday definitions from the practice of retro should be mentioned. The Danish web-based shop *Retrosiden* ([www.retrosiden.dk](http://www.retrosiden.dk)) describes its supply as

“furniture and other articles for everyday use from the period 1950-1980”. This shop is one of three webshops owned by Rehhoff Antik, the others being *Slidt og Hvidt* (“Worn and White”) with “everyday objects and nostalgia from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (<http://www.slidtooghvidt.dk/>) and *Rehhoff Antik* with “Danish antiquities from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Century” (<http://www.rehhoffantik.dk/>). Such distinctions between ‘retro’ and other categories such as ‘antiquities’ illustrate a common understanding of retro: it is attached to a particular period and functions as a marketing category.

The Swedish magazine *Scandinavian Retro* is a lavish monthly magazine dedicated to retro living and design started in 2012 as *Hus och Hem Retro*. An obvious testimony to the popularity of retro, it depicts the strong presence of retro in lifestyle media (see Elsie Baker 2013 chapter 6). A sample issue offers features on Finnish enamel kitchenware, a young Stockholm couple’s retro furnishing, and, as a supplement to the Scandinavian focus, a guide to the flea markets of Berlin (see ill. 1, p. 13). In a short video called “What is retro?” (“*Vad är retro?*”) editor Magnus Palm defines the subject of the magazine as “post-war modern”, primarily Scandinavian design from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (<http://www.husohem.se/retro>). Didactically, he points out what is “not retro”: antique objects such as a chandelier or folkloristic objects like a dower chest. Again, retro is a designation given exclusively to objects from the recent, modern past.

To sum up, there is a consensus among practitioners of and commentators on retro to designate it as a revival of material from a specific time: between 1950 and 1980. Sometimes earlier decades like the 1940s, the 1930s and even the 1920s are included, while the 1980s and even the 1990s, are available in some fields like computer-based retro or youth fashion. As this study will show, retro selects specific aspects of this past that can be identified as living up to a certain image of, for instance, ‘Fiftiesness’ (which I have chosen for a case study as an especially popular source of retro). This image is generally one of modernity, and retro is based on objects, images and practices of modern mass-production and culture. Sometimes retro is associated with re-makes, in contrast to authentically “vintage” historical objects. However, there is no evidence of this distinction in the history or practice of retro. Retro does not concern itself exclusively with either authentic or reproduced/facsimile objects. Retro is a designation attached to objects, images and practices that evokes the character of a recent past in the present. This character can be material, aesthetic or symbolic, and it can vary from total identification to minor allusions. The practice of retro should be defined as a deliberate act of active revival, in contrast to the unaware remainder of old-fashioned practices. For example, it is a practice of retro to have a special coffee pot from the

1980s in one's home with the wish to display its Eighties-look, while it is *not* a practice of retro if it is simply not replaced and stays in use without being a deliberate aesthetical choice. In this way, there is an accute awareness of the past and its relationship to the present embedded in retro. As a starting point, therefore, I will define retro as a deliberate revival of the recent past, usually concerning the period after 1945, and taking place in post-1960s Western culture.

### **Retro as objects in context**

Retro does not stand alone, but is related to, overlaps, and competes with other concepts. *Vintage* and *Mid-century modern* are currently popular terms while more distant relatives such as *kitsch*, *camp* and *cult* also come to mind. I will give a short definition of these in the following. I have chosen to focus on the term *retro* because it is the most general, with the others being limited to more specific object categories. Retro is of course defined by the temporal dimension of reintroducing something from the past. It is this impulse that I will explore, by viewing retro as a form of cultural memory based on modern objects and materiality. As the following reception history of retro will show, this aspect has been somewhat underexposed. Studies have tended to focus on either the more formalistic development of retro style, embedded in a sociological perspective on retro markets, for instance, or have focused philosophically on general debates of postmodernism, nostalgia or history.

As I will argue, it is important to understand retro in specific contexts: in a material, geographical and cultural setting. Retro is based on certain kinds of objects, and it should not be understood as an “anything goes”-concept, or as an all-inclusive buffet of all things past, with crinolines, Tudor houses and bell bottom trousers on the same plate. Retro is focused on objects between 1950 and 1980, with only minor extensions before and after. And, as this study will show, it is about a specific range of objects from this period. Selections of such ranges of objects are motivated by certain ideas about the eras referred to, i.e. to what could be called *Fiftiesness* or *Seventiesness*, a tendency which is also expressed in popular style categories like *Mid-century modern* or *Populuxe Americana*. It is obviously relevant to view these popular conceptions of the past as signs of the way in which cultural memory is used as a way of creating a common past. This common past is created in a negotiation between individual and collective memory, and between the domain of the historical, the aesthetic and the emotional.

To explain this dimension of retro, I will explore the practice of retro in two specific geographical locations: the Canadian city of Montreal and the German capital Berlin. Furthermore I

will frequently consider and refer to my own Danish context. This will attenuate the Anglo-American dominance of the existing retro reception. It is important to state that retro should be seen as a global–local relationship where an international current is practiced in a local context, and where external images of the past, such as the American 1950s, are mixed with more local ones. I will not draw a picture of retro as an essentially local culture celebrating local traditions and crafts in the way that the various antiques or crafts scenes have themselves attempted. Rather, I will show how retro is based on a specific condition: that modern, mass-produced and “artificial” objects are attributed a status of being authentic, original bearers of a certain meaning that moves beyond their original purpose and sign value. In this way they invest the modern past with a sense of specificity and belonging. To this end, I find particular inspiration in the studies of Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren, as explained in Chapter 2, and in the *production of locality* in a globalized world, as described by Arjun Appadurai (see Chapter 7).

An important aspect here is the actual distribution of objects. Retro occurs on the basis of material objects with physical presence and even agency. Accordingly, retro is practiced in an actual location and lived social context. Retro should then not be thought of in an utterly intellectual and rhetorical way as something that just happens through the power of thought. Retro indeed involves a lot of *things* and retro culture involves *doing things with things, being with things, and thinking with things*. It is a case of thing-based identity and culture. This does not imply an enclosed and essential understanding of things: that all attention should be devoted towards the objects in themselves, or “good objects” such as design classics; this would imply that the history of retro would be the history of a canonical design history. Concerning retro culture, I find it important, on the contrary, to understand objects in an expanded field. In a practice like retro, objects are mediated and remediated, remade and redesigned, forgotten and invented, and it is often the intangible things such as mediation, symbols and aesthetics that make up the material of retro culture.

Think of the example of a contemporary music video like American singer Bruno Mars’ “Treasure” (2013): a work that is considered to use retro aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> In this video, the singer and backing musicians are performing in disco-era suits with wide collars, while performing choreographed moves connoting the style of American black music of the time. The setting of the

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<sup>7</sup> “Like peanut butter and jelly, Bruno Mars and the whole retro vibe goes really, really well together”, as the video takes us “back to the 80s”. Post on webpage Celebuzz!: <http://www.celebuzz.com/2013-06-14/bruno-mars-goes-retro-again-for-treasure-music-video/> (accessed March 2014).



video references music videos of the past through the means of flashing lights that almost blind the camera, and the use of a visual afterimage effect often used in early music videos. The music itself obviously inspired by the recent past, with some critics identifying it as reviving 1970s disco such as Donna Summer, and others describing it as a nod to the “creamy Michael Jackson/Prince schooled soul” of the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the video combines objects like clothing, practices like dancing, and visual aesthetics like camera effects, with the sound of the music itself, to create a retro character of complex interplay that is not explained by a singular meaning. Instead, we see that retro effects point to retro as an *aesthetic*.

### **Retro as aesthetics**

In all of its different forms, retro is fundamentally an aesthetic phenomenon. It is always about attributing symbolic value to matter. And importantly, retro is not about functionality or institutionalized knowledge but primarily about a sensibility to the world’s appearance and about ideas of beauty: the way that aesthetics has been thought since Baumgarten and Kant in the Western World. The practice of retro is based on subjective judgments of taste, however socialized they may be. For one person, the old kettle is a valuable retro object to stage aesthetically in the home, but for others it’s a provisional working tool for boiling water, or else valueless rubbish. As with other kinds of aesthetics, retro should be considered in relation to an institution: as a social and cultural construct that is similar to how Arthur C. Danto has described the art world. Retro – viewed as an aesthetic sensibility enabling objects of the recent past to take on a special kind of beauty and being worthy of an aesthetic staging in various forms - occurs at a specific time in a socio-culturally limited field. And all retro judgments of taste are connected to a common system of understanding and a self-reflexive knowledge of this. The odd person collecting melamine kitchenware as a collector’s hobby without thinking of it as retro, or Cubans driving 1950s vintage cars in Havana (before it became an international tourist attraction) are not practicing retro, since they are unaware of their practice as retro and thus have other incentives.

Of course, retro is also an aesthetic that concerns issues of form, style and ideals of beauty. It involves such aesthetic institutions and worlds as design, fashion and the arts (including both classical ones, such as pictorial arts and literature, and newer ones like cinema and popular music). It is relevant to view retro from these historical perspectives throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for

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<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treasure\\_\(Bruno\\_Mars\\_song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treasure_(Bruno_Mars_song)) (accessed March 2014).



Ill. 3: Music video still from Bruno Mars: "Treasure", 2012.



Ill. 4: Pop culture as pastiche of itself in the 'Re'-decade. Cover image from Simon Reynolds: *Retromania*, 2011.

example in the avant-garde's questioning of high and low culture, ideas of the new in modernist art and design, historical citations in fashion, and ideas of postmodernism in general. Still, it is important not to see retro as though it were defined and initiated within traditional aesthetic disciplines, and then popularized "on the way down" the cultural pyramid. Retro is not an art "ism" or a philosophical idea that has gained a popular cultural circulation. It is an aesthetic happening in several cultural domains that are not easily identified - not even as fashion or design in the professional sense. Retro was not invented by a designer or a couturier, nor is it qualified through the criteria of these fields. It is important to note that retro emerged in a historical period characterized by the exceeding of existing boundaries and the emergence of new kinds of culture. The experimental art of the 1960s completed the move away from traditional formats like painting and sculpture, while social movements of the period lead to new cultural customs. This is reflected in the study and conceptions of culture itself, which I will pursue further in Chapter 2 with a discussion of notions of subculture and popular culture. This is an ongoing issue that surrounds retro in contemporary culture and the developments in retro as well as culture at large. As an aesthetic, retro is reflexive, being based on a self-consciousness of being retro, while it is also interdisciplinary insofar as it exceeds and deliberately mixes various levels of culture.

## **Authenticity, irony and nostalgia**

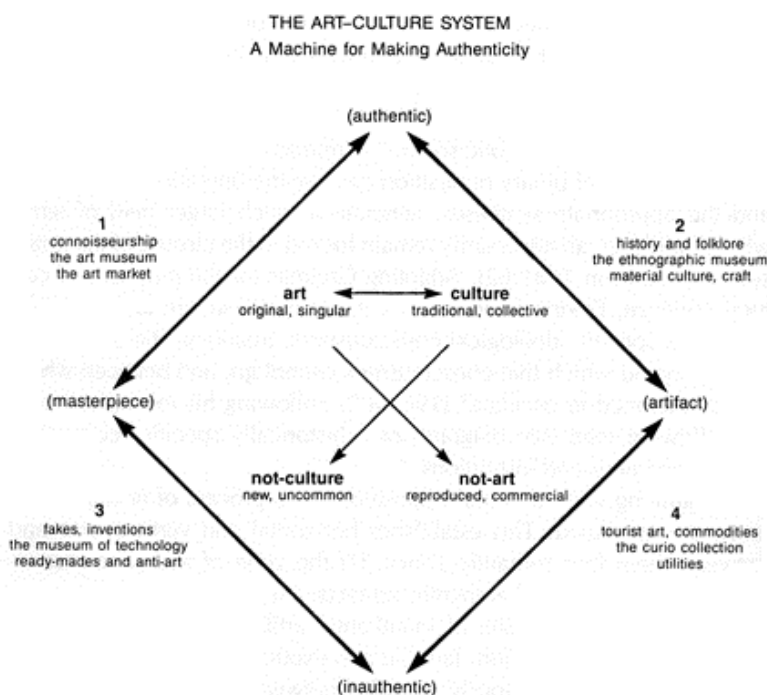
Considering retro as an aesthetic also entails examining some of the defining qualities of retro: its ambiguous authenticity, its irony, and its nostalgia.

### **Authenticity**

In James Clifford's object based culture model *the art-culture system* (Clifford, 1988) the relationship between different cultural spheres such as art, traditional culture and their less valued Others are defined through the mechanism of "making authenticity." Art means the original, singular masterpieces found in museums and among collectors, while inauthentic reproductions are decorations sold as commodities. True cultural objects are seen as authentic in the ethnographic museum, contrary to inauthentic souvenirs. In each case, contexts are established that define where the cultural objects belong. Objects may change contexts: they might be seen as art or as cultural artifacts at some point, and then drift away from that status again, or more commonly, they may be

elevated from an unadorned status of inauthenticity to one of high art (think of the status of jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and posthumously admired amateur artists like Henri Rosseau). They may also be trivial everyday objects that are celebrated as art (Chippendale furniture and Danish Modern), or at least preservation-worthy cultural historical artifacts that today can belong to any category (see also the *Rubbish theory* of Michael Thompson discussed in Chapter 2). The model shows this “machine for making authenticity,” and Clifford accentuates that the valuing of authenticity is typical to Western (modern) culture.

**Fig. 1: The Art-Culture System**



(Clifford 1988, p. 224)

Interestingly, retro objects can be thought into this system. They are generally mundane objects given authenticity and elevated to the status of the fine arts and crafted culture. I will suggest that retro carries the meaning of authenticity from both domains: the unique *art authenticity* and the representative *cultural authenticity*. Consequently, the incitement for retro is its aesthetic staging - it is an aesthetic practice whose objects are sometimes displayed as art works as well as for their cultural representativeness, for instance when an object is seen as an example of authentic “Fiftiesness” and grouped with other cultural artifacts rather than works of art. Likewise, the objecthood of the retro object is situated in between the two: being based mainly on mass-produced

objects such as a vinyl record, a plastic bowl or an early computer, retro objects are not authentic in their singularity, and they are not perceived as masterpieces reflecting an artist subject like the conventional artwork. But neither are mere objects, and the individual object is often attributed with patina and an “object biography”: *this* sign hung on this very shop in the 1960s, or, *this* badge has actually been worn at Northern Soul club evenings in the 1970s. Retro objects often belong to cultural categories that challenge conventional notions of authenticity such as the mass-distributed and promoted movie or the record album. In these media the art work is to some extent mechanically reproduced and not based on a singular object.

In brief, the term authenticity has its origins in the Greek *autos* (self) and *authéntes* (originator) and originally means “that which is equal to itself, defines itself and has the authority from itself” (Dehs 2012, 25). Today authenticity is recognized as a widespread concept that is not easily defined. It is tempting to define it negatively, as the experience of inauthenticity is often easier to identify. The authentic would then be defined by the absence of the symptoms of inauthenticity (Dehs 2012, 7). Still, as Clifford’s model suggests, authenticity seems to be a central and much-coveted term in contemporary culture. For instance, in the popular account *The Authenticity Hoax*, (2011) the Canadian journalist and philosopher Andrew Potter depicts how our contemporary culture has uncritically fallen in love with the authentic: “[...] the ”essential” core of life is something called authenticity, and finding the authentic has become the foremost spiritual quest of our time” which takes place at the intersection of “environmentalism and the market economy, personal identity and consumer culture, and artistic expression and the meaning of life” (Potter 2011, 3). At the least, other books like *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (2003) and *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (2007) suggest that authenticity has high market value. This was also the conclusion of the surveys by John Zogby, published in the *The Way We’ll Be*, (2008) about Americans’ political views, consumer preferences, and perspectives on life in general. Here, the conclusion indicated “a deep-felt need to reconnect with the truth of our lives and to disconnect from the illusions that everyone from advertisers to politicians tries to make us believe are real” (from Potter 2011, 5), and what Zogby found in the general portrait of the Americans was a “desire for authenticity.” As journalist Virginia Postrel points out, authenticity has become increasingly associated with objects, and particularly with the social and identity-forming significance of objects and their consumption. The notion that “I like that” has increasingly come to mean “I am like that” in our daily life as well as in politics, media

and culture, (Postrel 2004, 101) in what Postrel sees as a general aestheticization of every aspect of our lives (also discussed by Mike Featherstone and Lash & Lurie presented in Chapter 2).

It is possible so see retro as part of this quest for authenticity. Retro is obviously about conquering new territory for the authentic. Previously valueless objects, with all their symptoms of inauthenticity, such as flying duck wall décor and disco records, are revalued by retro for their authenticity. Further, aestheticizing life with retro objects can be seen as a desire for the real instead of the planned obsolescence of modern life. Nevertheless, retro also has an ironic element at its core that problematizes these notions of authenticity.

### **Irony**

Where authenticity concerns something being equal to itself, irony signals the opposite: saying something contrary to what is meant. Irony (roots in greek *eironiea*, which originally meant to lie, but was reinterpreted by way of Socratic irony (Colebrook 2004, 2)) is, as Claire Colebrook describes in her guide to the term, both a figure of speech – saying one thing and meaning another, and an attitude to existence – expressing skepticism and mistrust in cultural practices. It can thus be “as little as saying ‘Another day in paradise’, when the weather is appalling,” but it can also refer to larger cultural problems of postmodernity, when “our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says,” as we “live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony” (Colebrook 2004, 1). Irony is one of the most familiar and much-debated aspects of the postmodern, both in its general philosophical paradigm (*postmodernity*) as well as in the cultural works defined as postmodern (*postmodernism*). Here, irony is often encountered in the citation of the past, and in a use of past styles which are seldom true to the past, but rather in an ironic gesture that shows awareness of its multiple positions and contexts. When we are confronted with so many positions and contexts from past and present, we “have to be ironic” to be “capable of maintaining a distance from any single definition or context, quoting and repeating various voices from the past” (Colebrook 2004, 3). In such cases irony is a reflexive stance towards an increasingly complex cultural context. But there is, of course, a cost. According to the critique of modern irony, it levels values by way of its defiance of the real. Furthermore, irony’s cliquishness can be seen as elitist.

As literary critic Wayne Booth has pointed out, irony relies on the audience or receiver recognizing that what the speaker says cannot be what the speaker means (Booth 1974). Irony is a complex language practice which demands shared conventions and assumptions. It is

often very culturally specific, understandable only in context. In this way, it is potentially a socially excluding mechanism contributing to inequality and lack of common understanding and values. The political meaning of irony is also identified as ambiguous. Irony has been “perceived as a force of liberation” as well as “a mode of elitism” that upholds hierarchies (Colebrook 2004, 20). It is “both questioning and elitist, both disruptive of norms and constitutive of higher ideals. On the one hand, irony challenges any ready-made consensus or community, allowing the social whole and everyday language to be questioned. On the other hand, the positioning of this questioning and ironic viewpoint is necessarily hierarchical, claiming a point of view beyond the social whole and above ordinary speech and assumptions” (Colebrook 153). Canadian literary historian Linda Hutcheon (1994) also identifies this ambiguity of the postmodern irony, which she sees as having a political and critical potential, while also recognizing its potential for maintaining structures of power. This ambivalent status is also seen as characterizing retro culture, insofar as it entails an ironic questioning of existing value systems and canonical heritage, but also establishes a new exclusive hierarchy of knowledge and value. Politically, retro has been seen as both progressive and conservative, which I will comment on further in Chapter 4.

Apart from this, irony in contemporary culture is contested for its sheer distance and emptiness. As a casual example of irony, Colebrook mentions these retro practices: “we wear 1980s disco clothing or listen to 1970s country and western music, not because we are committed to particular styles or senses, but because we have started to question sincerity and commitment in general; everything is as kitsch and dated as everything else, so all we can do is quote and dissimulate” (Colebrook 2-3). Apart from identifying disco clothing with the 1980s rather than the 1970s, the decade with which disco is usually associated, the example identifies the cultivation of the recent past as an expression of the postmodern condition where “anything goes” and a relativism of attitudes is the norm.<sup>9</sup> While I do not deny that there is an aspect of this in retro culture - and of course retro and postmodernism are historically connected - this study will question the full identification of retro with postmodernism and the tendency to believe that the practice of retro by definition means denying sincerity and commitment and looking upon “everything as kitsch.” As this study argues, retro is centered on specific periods, certain kinds of objects, and practices that express commitment to something. Being intensively practiced in new ways long after the era of

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<sup>9</sup> A notion roughly translated from Danish *attituderelativisme*. A concept created by poet Hans Jørgen Nielsen in the 1960s, seen as enclosing and anticipating postmodernism.

postmodernism in the 1980s, retro should be discussed on its own terms, and in the context of contemporary culture, rather than as an element in the prolonged discussion of the postmodern.

Irony in its various forms is characterized by knowingness, self-consciousness and cynicism – features which are defining for retro and distinguish it from other uses of the past, such as the deadly serious idealization of the community’s “good old days” or the nation’s Golden Age, or the sentimental longing for one’s own past. In relation to irony, the longing of nostalgia appears as its opposite, which is another sensibility associated with retro and contemporary culture.

### **Nostalgia**

As Linda Hutcheon has observed, there is a surprising pairing of irony and nostalgia in postmodern culture.<sup>10</sup> Postmodern artifacts (and these may easily include retro) have often been deemed “simultaneously ironic and nostalgic,” and irony and nostalgia share an “unexpected twin evocation of both affect and agency – or, emotion and politics” (Hutcheon 2000, 22). Furthermore, irony and nostalgia are similar in their stance towards the object. Calling something ironic or nostalgic is “less a *description* of the *entity itself* than an attribution of a quality of *response*” (ibid.). As is commonly understood, you either succeed or fail at “getting” an ironic point; irony is something which “happens,” rather than residing in the object. Similarly, nostalgia also “happens” when confronted with an object, not as “something you ‘perceive’ in an object; it is something that you ‘feel’ when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you, and often carry considerable weight” (ibid.). Thus, irony and nostalgia are equally intellectual and affective, and are always in relation to something.

Despite its Greek name, nostalgia as a concept does not date from antiquity, but was allegedly coined in a treatise by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688 (Boym 2001, 3). The neologism of Greek “Nostos” (return home) and “Algia” (longing) was created as a diagnosis of a then acknowledged disease among Swiss soldiers fighting long from home. As such, it was a curable physical disease (even if epidemic), with the return home (or, the promise of it) a cure. This inevitably changed as nostalgia attained its more modern meaning as an incurable longing even though, according to psychiatrist Fred Davis, “well into the modern era a strong semantic bound between the disease category nostalgia and some commonsensical notion of homesickness remained

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<sup>10</sup> In the article “Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern”, (University of Toronto English Language Main Collection. 1998, online: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html> (accessed September, 2013) and in a dialogue article with Mario J. Valdés, Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern: A Dialogue, *Poliografias* 3, 1998-2000.



largely intact” (Davis 1979, 3-4). The romantics at the threshold of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century engaged in longing so much that “I long therefore I am” became the romantic motto (Boym 2001, 13), as was expressed in their Medieval revivalism, with its utopian longing for the distant past. The promotion of the homeland in the national-romantic awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was, of course, highly relevant to the nostalgia that was “institutionalized” in national and provincial museums and urban memorials (Boym 2001, 15).

According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is essentially tied to the modern experience and motivated by “not only dislocation in space but also with the changing conception of time” (Boym 2001, 7). It has increasingly become an abstract and impossible longing: “[...] a mourning for the impossibility of mythic return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for the absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (Boym 2001, 8). As both Boym and Davis present it, nostalgia is not just an individual emotion but operates collectively in social and cultural forms. The late modern world after WW2 seems to especially cultivate nostalgia, and the word has gained a positive connotation that has been exploited by popular and commercial use. According to Fred Davis, who was the first to study cultural nostalgia in *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (1979), nostalgia seemed to have been finally “demedicalized” and increasingly “depsychologized” by a rapid assimilation into American popular speech in the 1950s (Davis 1979, 4-5). Here, it was regarded as a “fancy-word,” but soon became widely popular and available with notions of a “nostalgia-craze” in the 1970s (which I will return to in Chapter 4). Davis identified three “orders” of nostalgia (Davis 1979, 17-26). The *First order*, or *Simple nostalgia*, is a positively toned evocation of the past, creating an image of “The Beautiful Past and the Unattractive Present,” in which “Things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilized)(more exiting) *then* than *now*” (Davis 18). In the *Second order* or *Reflexive nostalgia* another voice is added asking “Was it really that way?” in a reflexive tone. And the *Third order* or *Interpreted nostalgia* questions the feeling itself, raising speculation as to “Why am I feeling nostalgic? What may this mean for my past, for my now? Is it that I am likely to feel nostalgia at certain times and places and not at others? If so, when and where? What uses does nostalgia serve for me? For others? For the times we live in?” (Davis 24-25). This gradation reflects equally the simplifying and regressive, as well as the critical and progressive sides of nostalgia. And arguably the cultural products of the “nostalgia wave” were quick to adapt, not just the first, but also the second and third order nostalgias with popular movies

like *American Graffiti* (1973) and hit songs like Don McLean's *American Pie* (1971) questioning the time recalled as well as the nostalgic position, with their ambivalent portrayals of the recent past (see Chapter 4). I will argue that retro encompasses all three orders, as it playfully questions the character of the recent past, sometimes even against dominating assumptions of it, and also expresses an awareness and discussion of the contemporary position of the practitioner.

Boym directs her reading of nostalgia towards a more sociocultural scale by identifying two tendencies of nostalgia in contemporary culture. These are the *restorative nostalgia* and the *reflexive nostalgia* (Boym 2001). Restorative nostalgia "puts emphasis on the *nostos* [home] and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (Boym 2001, 41). The restorative nostalgics do not see themselves as nostalgic, but rather believe that their project is about truth. It is this kind of nostalgia that characterizes "national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories" (Ibid.). These are perfected and total reconstructions, based on ideas of the morally authentic rather than material authenticity. Examples could be the re-erected Tsar statues in Post-communist Russia (and the political discourse uniting the Soviet and Tsarist past) or the Skopje 2014 project erecting antique-inspired statues and buildings to give the Macedonian capital a "true historical identity".<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, reflexive nostalgia "dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (ibid.). It "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (ibid.), rather than perfect reconstructions of perfect pasts. It is constantly aware of the gap between identity and resemblance, the irrevocability of the past and human finitude, and of the impossibility of returning home. It is thus about the longing itself, with the possible danger to decline into static longing. Where the restorative nostalgia always takes itself deadly serious, reflexive nostalgia can be "ironic and humorous" with a narrative of the past that is "ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary" (Boym 2001, 50). Boym's example of this kind of nostalgia is the Nostalgiya Snack Bar in Ljubljana. Decorated with retro objects from the East as well as the West, such as Sputnik posters, Yugo-pop and consumer products, it was a place with no political intentions and nor was it attempting to restore any real place. Instead, it used nostalgia to play with notions of past and present. Presumably, such a place could not exist in Zagreb or Belgrade, where nostalgia is restorative and deadly serious.

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<sup>11</sup> Described in Kristian Handberg: "Pænt men ikke Prangende" in Weekendavisen, October 4th, 2013.

I will state it as obvious to identify retro as primarily resonating with reflexive nostalgia. Retro is exactly an ironic and fragmentary contrasting of elements from the past with the present. Retro though does not have the mourning character of the melancholic nostalgia and does not happen after a traumatic deportation from home. As such it is a leisure-based nostalgia but still one of huge attraction and resonance in contemporary culture. Considering its popularity, retro-based types of cultural revivals can arguably be so dedicated that one may at times almost feel that a 1950s rockabilly universe, or retro-housewife image, are held up as “truths”: worlds that should sincerely and seriously be restored. As discussed further on, this is arguably an increasing tendency in retro culture.

Certain discussions of nostalgia focus on its relation to history. Conventionally, nostalgia is seen as the opposite of the objective history. It is assumed subjective, biased and essentially lying, and covers the real past in a rose-colored light. For instance, Fredric Jameson has said that “a history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos” (Jameson 1991, 156), while historian David Lowenthal has stated that “nostalgia tells it like it wasn’t” (Lowenthal 1989). Certainly, as Davis states, “more than “mere past” is involved. It is a past imbued with special qualities, which, moreover, acquires its significance from the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features of our present lives.” (Davis 1979, 13). A unique interpretation of this is by Susannah Radstone, who pursues an explanation of nostalgia through psychoanalysis (Radstone 2007). In her analysis the longing for the past is associated with a gendered fetishism. Even the nostalgia-criticism of Jameson is analyzed by Radstone as an example of this nostalgic fetishism: “Jameson’s future-oriented, Marxist utopianism can be read, at one level, as the displacement of belief in the Oedipal promise, in fathers and father figures – beliefs that lean on a fetishistic nostalgia for the phallic woman, and that attempt to make the future resemble (an illusory) past” (Radstone 2007, 156).

It is also possible, however, to recognize both a potential for critical reflection in nostalgia, which Boym does, and a new attention towards more affective and unofficial ways of dealing with the past, which I will elaborate in my discussion of cultural memory.

## Introduction of related sensibilities: Kitsch, camp and cult

The use of retro happens in an unauthorized way by means of intuitive and local meanings, and with a knowing ease that Guffey describes as “rolls of the tongue with an ease that transcends slang” (Guffey 2006, 9). Thus, it is sometimes seen as overlapping with other related cultural currents and concepts. Among these are *kitsch*, *camp*, and *cult*. They also re-categorize attributes, giving objects, symbols and practices new and re-valued meanings. Like retro, they are also often aimed at the discarded and low cultural products of modern culture: mass-produced, cheap, and belonging to the low-brow popular culture. Being older than retro, the reception of these terms have been more profound and sometimes central for the cultural debate of art, culture and modernity. Still, however, a similar uncertainty about their meaning and designation in contemporary culture may be recognized. The literature on kitsch, cult and camp still has the character of brief commentary or colorful illustration rather than being definitive or qualifying.<sup>12</sup> It is not my aim to pursue a larger exploration of these terms in this study. For this reason, I will not use them in an exhaustive and defining manner. Rather, I will present them below at this introductory stage, and henceforth let them play a somewhat less obtrusive role.

### Kitsch

The oldest of these concepts is kitsch. It also has the most contested cultural history and has generally been commented upon the most. Different explanations of the origins of the word exist, all dating to the art scene of the 1860s and 1870s Munich. According to one explanation, “kitsch” is derived from a mispronunciation of the English word “sketch” by souvenir sellers in conversation with Anglo-American tourists. Another explanation relates the word to the German verbum *verkitschen* which in the Mecklenburg dialect means “making something cheap”. Finally, it is interpreted as related to the verb *kitschen*, which means collecting garbage in the streets, or in South-western Germany to “make new furniture of old furniture” (Calinescu 1987, 234).

Even though kitsch is commonly associated with backwardness and regression, the Romanian-American literature historian Matei Calinescu lists kitsch as one of the *Five Faces of Modernity* in his book of the same name – in other words, he views it as a central aspect of modern culture. According to Calinescu, the concept of kitsch and the debate surrounding it should be

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<sup>12</sup> For example, there are no recent publications on the concept of kitsch as such, leaving the defining and debating role to decade-old works as Calinescu (1987) or Gillo Dorfles (1969).

understood through a combination of three perspectives: a) a socio-historical approach, where kitsch is a product of modernity and connected to industrialization, b) commercialism and the increased amount of leisure time in society, and c) a moral and aesthetic approach, where kitsch means inauthentic art and the production of “aesthetical lies” (Calinescu 1987, 262). Multiple understandings of kitsch are in circulation, and the uncertainty that surrounds its meaning arguably stems from the lack of an opposite concept. There is no negative definition of kitsch – it is impossible to complete the sentence “kitsch is not ...” with any noun. Calinescu suggests that kitsch is defined as a “specially aesthetic form of lying. As such, it obviously has a lot to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold. Kitsch, then, is a recent phenomenon. It appears at the moment in history when beauty in its various forms is socially distributed like any other commodity subject to the essential market law of supply and demand” (Calinescu 1987, 229). This definition combines the moral definition (kitsch as lying) with the socio-historical perspective of kitsch as a product of modern capitalist society. However, since kitsch is found within the general categories of being produced as entertainment or as propaganda (as political kitsch or religious kitsch), kitsch in totalitarian societies is also considered.

Calinescu also describes kitsch as implicating an “aesthetic inadequacy” (Calinescu 1987, 236). This explains how all objects can be made into kitsch, as when an antique statue is reproduced as a knick-knack, or a Rembrandt-painting is installed in the billionaire’s elevator. However, Calinescu is also aware that kitsch may gain a “strange kind of negative prestige even in the some of the most intellectual circles” through an “ironic connoisseurship” (Calinescu 1987, 30). This cultivation of kitsch is referred to as ‘camp’: “Camp cultivates bad taste – usually the bad taste of yesterday – as a superior form of refinement” (ibid.). This of course comes close to a definition of retro (with the temporal element of yesterday’s kitsch) but the definition of kitsch is still aimed at its cultural status and not its historicity, as opposed to retro.

This understanding of kitsch as *camp* (I will return to the concept of camp itself) points at the many roles of kitsch making it “one of the most bewildering and elusive categories in modern aesthetics” (Calinescu 232). It is also worth noting that kitsch has had a remarkable exchange with the artistic avant-garde: “The avant-garde is interested in kitsch for aesthetically subversive and ironical purposes, and kitsch may use avant-garde procedures (which are easily transformed into stereotypes) for its aesthetically conformist purposes” (Calinescu 254). The relationship between kitsch and avant-garde described here is quite different from that expressed by modernist art critic Clement Greenberg in his famous 1939 essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. To

Greenberg, avant-garde and kitsch are clearly and thoroughly opposed, where the avant-garde means the modernism of the purified disciplines of the arts like abstract painting. Even though Greenberg also sees them both as cultural forms of the modern world, the modernist avant-garde is ultimately a rescuing counterforce to the cultural rear-guard of kitsch. Again, kitsch is viewed aesthetically and morally as imitating and inauthentic, and socio-historically as a product of either the capitalist market or new totalitarian regimes. In Greenberg's view, the avant-garde of the late 1930s was threatened by two kinds of kitsch: the commercial kitsch from capitalist USA and the political kitsch from the totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, Spain and the Soviet Union. Greenberg defines kitsch with these words:

*Kitsch using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.*<sup>13</sup>

This critic has no doubts about the character of kitsch and depicts it as an extensive but monotonous category. The denunciation of kitsch has been an important aspect of the modernist avant-garde position as well as the more conservative high-brow bastion. Kitsch has been a broad category for the “aesthetically inadequate” since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The German literary historian and philosopher Hans-Dieter Gelfert answers the question *Was ist Kitsch?* (in his book of the same name from 2000) with eighteen types of kitsch - from cozy, homely kitsch to monumental and pathos-filled kitsch. These types of kitsch objects can be placed into two broad categories: the ones that please their audience by carrying an appeal of something homely, child-like and introverted - which can be seen as matching the psychological mechanism of *regression* - and the ones that express strong authority and an appeal to do something - which answers to the psychological act of *projection*. And kitsch always has the effect of fixation: giving a tangible and stable form to abstract ideas like emotions, nature, the nation and art.

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<sup>13</sup> Clement Greenberg: *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, New Partisan Review 1939. Here quoted from Charles Harrison & Paul Wood: *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Blackwell Publishing 2003, 543.

This simplifying effect of kitsch is the object of the ironic use of kitsch. Exposing the aesthetic inadequacy of kitsch objects in a staged context invests these formerly simplistic objects with an abstractness or even subversive otherness. This strategy was used by avant-garde artists like Max Ernst in his collage books of re-assembled kitschy images like *La femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934) or later by Asger Jorn in his *Modifications* series, where trivial kitsch paintings were augmented with the artist's wildly expressive brushstrokes. Such works express a different relationship between the avant-garde and kitsch than that proclaimed by Greenberg, even though these works have the artist's visible touch added to secure distance from kitsch. In contemporary kitsch cultivation, it is the objects in themselves which are re-valued. In Montreal's Kitsch n' Swell shop, for example, a supply of kitsch objects are on display as a spectacular Other to contemporary material culture. The clichéd masculinity of a set of souvenir antlers and the femininity of a knitted toilet roll cover doll are ironically displayed as attractions. These objects may also be seen as retro (as analyzed in Chapter 5) and their kitsch character underscores their period-piece qualities. Retro, however, is defined through its character of revival and is - as observed through this study - increasingly dissociated from the kitsch category and its anti-aesthetics.

### Camp

According to Dansk Sprognævn (The Danish Language Committee), who registered the word in 1966, 'camp' is "something so dated, exaggerated, banal and melodramatic that it is seen as chic or entertaining."<sup>14</sup> As early as 1909, camp was included in the Oxford English Dictionary with the following definition: "*ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals. So as a noun, 'camp' behaviour, mannerisms, et cetera. (cf. quot. 1909); a man exhibiting such behaviour*" - even though it is described as a rare word.<sup>15</sup> Seemingly, it still had the character of rarity in the early 1960s, when Susan Sontag wrote the essay "Notes on Camp" (1964). Sontag describes camp as a hardly noticed or newly defined sensibility of the present. The essence of this sensibility is the "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (Sontag 1964). Camp is an aestheticizing approach and "a way of seeing the world as

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<sup>14</sup> "noget som er så umoderne, overdrevet, banalt og melodramatisk at det anses for smart eller underholdende", Dansk Sprognævn: Nye ord i dansk på nettet, <http://www.nyeordidansk.dk/noid/noid.htm?q=camp> (accessed September 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Here from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp\\_\(style\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_(style)) (accessed September 2013).

an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (Ibid.). Sontag gives a long list of the objects of camp. These examples form a colorful cabinet of curiosities, spanning from bombastic operas over Art Nouveau-associated artifacts such as Tiffany lamps and Beardsley drawings, older Hollywood films like King Kong, to examples of contemporary popular culture like Scopitone films, exotic pop singers and stag movies. This repertoire of popular culture from the more or less recent past is reminiscent of the later retro culture, where “Women’s clothes of the twenties (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.)” are mentioned as examples of camp. The temporal affiliation is, however, not decisive but rather a means to create the status of exaggerated *Otherness*: “The process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment – or arouse a necessary sympathy. [...] Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it to the Camp sensibility,” which “we are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own” (ibid.). Another common feature is many of the objects’ positions between high and low culture. The ability to practice this re-negotiation belongs to a specific social group of urbane tastemakers: “an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (ibid.). Camp is seen as belonging to a narrow and advanced social environment that is reminiscent of conventional urban bohemia. This makes it markedly different from retro, which has been widely distributed in a broader cultural current, with a connection to youth and subcultures rather than to an artistic urban elite. Another difference is the emphasis on the exaggerated and spectacular in camp, whereas retro is generally based on more subdued references and objects of everyday culture. Even though retro may from time to time include more carnivalesque forms (for example the revival of musicians like Esquivel! as well as Burlesque dancing), it is often characterized by a more casual attitude that blends into contemporary everyday culture in a way that Sontag’s camp could not and would not. Finally, the special connection to homosexual culture that Sontag accentuates in camp is not recognized as a defining feature of retro.<sup>16</sup>

I will suggest that camp can be understood in two ways: either as a historical cultural phenomenon happening at a specific place at a specific time - as Susan Sontag portrays it in early 1960s New York - or, in the more general sense pointed to in dictionaries. In its historical context, the staging of the ornamented objects of Art-Nouveau and of the despised popular culture could be

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<sup>16</sup> There is definitely some uncertainty around this topic. To this date, there have been no focused studies of retro culture and homosexuality. Sarah Elsie Baker discuss questions of gender in her recent study of retro design for the home, but does not comment upon non-hetero roles, since there were no non-heterosexuals among her interviewees.



seen as a counter to the idea of good taste established by high modernism with its mantra “form follows function,” and belief in progress and *the new*. In both cases camp is a self-conscious and intentional practice. As such, camp differs from the concept of kitsch, which is primarily used to describe the ignorant cultural habits of the broader population. Camp can be seen as the first attempt to describe an intentional re-contextualization of modern cultural products. As such, it is sometimes seen as synonymous with the “ironic connoisseurship” of kitsch as by Calinescu. The objects of camp enlisted by Sontag could be seen as kitsch while the defining artificiality of the camp objects resonates with the “aesthetic lies” of kitsch.

## Cult

As an adjective, cult is first registered in the Danish language in 1985 and defined as: “describing a worshipping of persons or things that is different from religious or reverend worshipping.”<sup>17</sup> This definition is also adequate for the English word’s meaning in modern culture where it is most often found in connection to a noun, as in cult “event,” “figure” or “film.” Particularly in the field of film, the use of “cult” as increased, as Danish film historian Anne Jerslev has described in *Kultfilm og filmkultur* (1993). The works that attain a status of “cult movies” are often quite dissimilar: Jerslev mentions re-premiers of classic movies like *Casablanca* (1942) and *The Big Sleep* (1946) as well as movies with instant cult status like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) or the oeuvre of directors like John Waters and his deliberate use of b-movie aesthetics. The event around the movie is defining for its cult status, and thus, it is the relations between the movie and the audience that is the cult movie.

Like the term *culture*, the word cult is derived from Latin ‘cultus,’ which in its original religious sense meant “a system of rites and ceremonies that are performed again and again to the worship of the deity” (Jerslev 1993, 12). In the theories of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the rituals might seem to be practiced outwards for the gods, but they also have an inward function for the group, which has to do with the preservation of the social order – a thinking taken further by his student Maurice Halbwachs in his theory of collective memory as constitutive for the group identity, as described in Chapter 3. “Cult” has been given a new religious meaning that describes alternative group formations of neo-religious and spiritual groups. Such groups are sometimes defined as standing outside of an established church or organized cult. This

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<sup>17</sup> Kult: ”om andet end religiøs eller ærbødig dyrkelse af personer eller ting”, , Dansk Sprognævn: Nye ord i dansk på nettet, <http://www.nyeordidansk.dk/noid/noid.htm?q=kult> (accessed September 24th , 2013).

use became common in the 1970s and 1980s and concerned new religious and political ‘cults,’ and obviously, it may have been transferred to different forms of ritualistic but profane worshipping within popular culture, for instance related to film. Midnight shows, for example, were a popular feature as a ritualized practice outside the theatres’ normal program in 1970s America. The midnight movie had its roots in the underground and avant-garde culture of the 1960s New York, while screenings of exploitation and B-movies with sex and violence became a part of this countercultural scene (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 13). In the 1970s, midnight movies became a diverse and widespread popular phenomenon across America, uniting Art House and B-movies as the “urban and College town equivalent of the drive-in” (Mathijs and Sexton 14) in a social film event.

Earlier in the 20th Century, “cult” had been used to describe the overall film culture as a suggestive mass medium. In his essay *Kult der Zerstreung* (*The Cult of Distraction*, 1926) the German critic Siegfried Kracauer describes the film as a cult for the urban masses that has to be seen as a total artwork of effects that also includes the building and the social space of the projection. This was before the *talkies*, so the cinematic experience also included live music and often several movies were shown as part of a larger program. The contemporary notion of *cult film* does not concern cinema as such, but is rather a subculture or counterculture inside the cinematic institution. When a given film is placed in the “cult movie” category, this involves an oppositional stance towards mainstream movie and the commercial industry. The cult category, however, has itself been going through changes. Home video and digital downloads have changed cinematic behavior, and the characteristics of the cult movie have been adapted by other genres. Jerslev describes how (already in the early 1990s) elements of the cult movie culture have become more commonly distributed and accessible, not only in movies, but also in TV-shows and advertising. Furthermore, elements of the cult movie culture have been spread as an informal, non-empathetic and to a certain extent independent handling of media products (Jerslev 1993, 140). It could be said that former *cult* practices like camp or retro have undergone a similar development.

The cult term has also been used to describe phenomena outside the world of film in contemporary culture. It has been used about trends, tendencies or communities of interest that do not belong to any established genre, institution or subculture. Cult is used to describe many retro practices, and there is often a retro element in the cult movie celebration of popular culture of the recent past. Well known examples are the revival of Blaxploitation movies of the 1970s and the

retro references and aesthetics in the works of “cult movie” directors like John Waters and Quentin Tarantino.

Cult culture has obvious overlaps with the camp category and the cultivation of kitsch. They are often perceived as expressing the same sensibility in their ironic re-contextualization of the objects of modern culture. It is worth noting however that the concepts have their origins in different cultural contexts, as shown above. The kitsch concept originates from the art debate and is related to (a lack of) taste and culture. Camp is attached to homosexual culture and as such to a minority culture and issues of identity. The cult concept is primarily related to film culture and its social culture, and to modern media consciousness.

To a certain extent, the concepts can be set up as historically successive. Kitsch has its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently took its principal definition in relation to the debate around modernist art. Camp was recognized in the 1960s and cult in the subsequent decades. Arguably, retro is the next cultural phenomenon in this lineage, further developing elements from the previous ones as well as adding entirely new aspects.

It is also worth noting that the three concepts seem to develop an increasingly affirmative relationship to their target field. Naming a given range of objects “kitsch” signals distance and expresses a wish to define bad taste and then exclude it from the field of “real” art. Even the ‘ironic connoisseurship’ of kitsch affirms, rather than ignores, this distance. Because of the identity-forming status camp has in its relation to homosexuality, camp comes nearer to establishing a close relationship between *things* and practitioners. As Sontag points out, its aestheticism is a particular way of viewing not just camp objects but the world as such. Cult has a performative and socially participatory dimension. In this way there is a direct connection between practitioners and cult objects, and the practitioners often have a real affection for these objects. As will be discussed later, the development of retro culture also moves towards an increasingly affirmative relationship.

## **The study of retro**

The concepts discussed above are also related to retro in their character as objects of study. Culturally they are situated between and beyond established territories such as art and folkloristic

heritage. Accordingly, the academic reception of them has reflected a lack of disciplinary ownership, leaving most of the reception to personal commentary or peripheral mention in other contexts. I will go through the reception of retro in the chapter on the 1950s in retro culture later on. Nonetheless it seems timely to mention the existing material that directly concerns retro. These are new titles, some of which have been published during the course of this research. Instead of arriving in an empty field, this study will then supply an emerging field of retro scholarship. Elizabeth E. Guffey was the first to publish a study of retro with the book *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (2006). The design historian discussed the revival of the recent, modern past in Western culture since the 1960s. For a long time this style-historical introduction was the only book on retro as such. But recently it was supplemented by design sociologist Sarah Elsie Baker's *Retro Style: Class, Gender and Design in the Home* (2013). Here, Baker explores the more sociological side of retro with a study of the use of retro objects in homes in Great Britain. She also emphasizes the themes of class and gender in her analysis of retro (see my review of this title in *Design and Culture* (Handberg 2014)).

While English music journalist Simon Reynolds' *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011) focuses on a specific area of retro practice, his book claims to take up the task of providing a general commentary on the spread of retro. This non-academic book has been widely debated and contested for its deterministic view - as I have argued there has been no lack of such determinism in the retro reception – and for its call to experimentation in pop culture (see for example review by Erik Steinskog: <http://www.vinduet.no/Artikler/Retromani>). Reynolds demands that music should always be experimental, groundbreaking, and above all, *new*, in order to have any relevance. A point of view clearly influenced by classic modernism with its ideal of purity and “prohibition” of citation and pastiche. *Retromania* is also, however, a rich and well-written reservoir of examples and observations from the contemporary (mainly musical) popular culture. As the reception of this work has been well-documented and accessible, I will not go much into it, nor will I reproduce Reynolds' argument. It is first and foremost a music book, and it is not the aim of this study to cover the music scene as such, even though (pop) music is a principal area for retro.

Furthermore, some articles and studies of other themes including retro should be mentioned. Angela McRobbie has written an interesting article on retro clothing in subcultures, “Second-hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket” (1989), and retro and vintage has sometimes been studied in the field of fashion studies, as in the anthology *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second-Hand Fashion* (Palmer and Clark (ed.) 2004). The study of second-hand culture in contemporary

Britain by Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures*, (2003) includes a chapter on retro shops, but does not analyze retro aesthetics as such. Gregson and Crewe (together with Kate Brooks) have also published the article “Bjorn Again? Rethinking 70s Revivalism through the Reappropriation of 70s Clothing” in *Fashion Studies* (2001), notably introducing two modes of retro revival: the *carnavalesque mode* of “fun” dressing-up, and a more dedicated knowing mode of retro appropriation. Adrian Franklin has approached retro as a sales object in the article “Consuming Design, Consuming Retro” (2002). And finally, Christian Thorne has formulated an interesting reading of retro and the apocalypse in American popular culture in the article “The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded” in *October* (2003).

In a Danish context, sociologist Børn Schiermer refers to retro in his article on the culture of irony (“Ironiens Kultur og kulturens ironi,” 2008), and Lisbeth Thorlacius describes the use of retro fashion among Danish teenagers in “Indie eller klassisk retro? Retromodens værdi og æstetiske status blandt danske unge” (2009). Also, fashion researcher Maria McKinney-Valentin has described retro trends in fashion in the article “Old News? Understanding Retro Trends in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fashion” (2010). A slightly older article by Christa Lykke Christensen, “Tingenes tidsalder: kitsch, camp og fetichisme” in the anthology *Omgang med tingene* (1993), should also be mentioned. Beside these academic studies, the market blossoms with retro-related publications in the more leisure field of life-style books. Here colorful titles present retro material from *Funk and Soul Album Covers* to computer design or the whole repertoire in *Retro Pop Culture A to Z: From Atari 2600 to Zombie Films*. Especially popular are instructional books such as *Vintage Hair Styling: Retro Style with Step-by-Step Techniques*, *Retro Makeup: Techniques for Applying the Vintage Look* and *Retro Desserts: Totally Hip, Updated Classic Desserts from the '40s, '50s, '60s, and '70s*. Of course, such titles belong in the retro practice rather than in the reception of it, and testify to retro’s popularity and accessibility.

The complex status of retro and its wide cultural range opens up many possible perspectives and a near-inexhaustible set of empirical sources. I will contend with this by concentrating on the aesthetic-cultural perspective. Thus, I will not cover all sociological aspects. In the site-specific cases from Montreal and Berlin, I have chosen not to pursue anthropological field studies in their strict sense with delimited objects of study. Instead, I have prioritized a more eclectic perspective to describe the cultural historical background for retro as well as more contemporary practices. I will explain my approach further in the following chapter, which draws a theoretical and methodological background for the study of retro.

## Chapter 2: Studying Retro: Material and cultural perspectives Theory and Method

### Introduction

As the previous chapter has indicated, the study of retro can be based in several disciplines, and it can draw on many methods, theoretical concepts and traditions. Inevitably, it will even mix disciplines and fields, as there is no obvious singular discipline for a cultural phenomenon that stretches from collecting kitchenware in flea markets to the aesthetics of leading popular cultural forms such as music and film. Thus, the theoretical and methodological background for my study will be pieced together from several fields and sources, and reflect the possibility of different ways of studying retro.

I will also use this chapter to comment upon different approaches to the study of culture and the nomination of concepts of culture such as *subculture* and *popular culture*. By doing this, it is possible to reflect on how the study of culture in academia corresponds to developments in contemporary culture. This, for instance, becomes apparent in the renewed interest in materiality, where the academic “material turn” and material culture studies resonates with a thing-based trend such as retro and a recognized interest in materiality in contemporary art.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the upsurge of memory in cultural memory studies is *preceded* by the “memory boom” in culture. Thus, this chapter has two goals: 1) to set up the most relevant apparatus of concepts and methods for my study of retro, and 2) to account for the development of these concepts and methods, adding a scientific as well as a cultural-historical background to the study of retro.

My simple point of departure is to see retro culture as *doings* with *things*, or as cultural *practices* that always concerns objects. Therefore, I will approach retro from an *object perspective*, which deals with how *things* are studied and what the meaning of *things* is today. This is supplanted with a *culture perspective*, which approaches retro through different notions of culture, and where retro is being defined as a cultural nomination. Furthermore, I will analyze

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<sup>18</sup> The newest volume in the series *Documents of Contemporary Art* issued by Whitechapel Gallery at The MIT Press, (Each volume “focusing on a specific subject or body of writing that has been of key influence in contemporary art internationally”) has “The Object” as its theme presenting texts about objects and materiality from a wide range of contexts. Hudek, Antony: *The Object*, The MIT Press 2014.

retro's special cultural role as *cultural memory*. As I want to give special attention to the complex field of cultural memory, this topic is given its own chapter following this one.

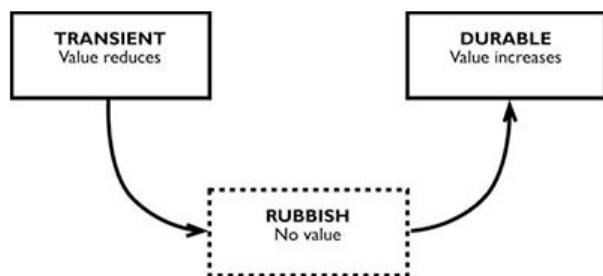
I will begin this theoretical and methodological chapter by characterizing the retro object through the *Rubbish Theory* of Michael Thompson. I will then go into discussing material culture studies and how theories of the dynamic status of cultural objects and the exchange between things and humans are central for understanding retro. Then the cultural perspective with the notions of subculture and popular culture, with a focus on objects and their identity-forming meaning, is added. Afterwards I will unfold this to the broader perspective of contemporary culture and conditions such as the aestheticization of everyday life, the global culture industry and the complex factors of individual and collective identity. Finally, I will introduce some particularly relevant concepts and observations, which specify the understanding of retro in contemporary culture and its doings with things.

## Doing with things

### The retro object: from rubbish to riches?

In Michael Thompson's memorably titled book *Rubbish Theory* from 1979 three stages in the life of our modern objects are listed. At first, the objects are distributed into a functional and transient phase, elsewhere called "first-cycle consumption," with a value that is reduced over time. Then, sooner or later, they will inevitably enter the status of obsolescence and valuelessness: they will become "rubbish". But from here, objects can be revived to enter a new status of value as *durables* where the value increases over time (Thompson 1979). It is Thompson's claim that this happens at many levels in culture and all objects are potential subjects to this cycle.

**Fig.2: Michael Thompson: Rubbish Theory**



(Thompson 1979, p. 10.)

It is an interesting basis for this mechanism that objects endure longer than their first phase economic value. As Thompson says, their physical life cycle endures longer than their economic. They usually still exist after cycling out of economic value, if they are not actively destroyed. In garages, attics and storages there were still plenty of easy listening records, ornamented 1970s plastic boxes and *Stevengraphs* (Thompson's example of the mass-produced woven pictures that suddenly gained value as collectables in the 1960s after having been considered valueless for many years). The items were physically present and available for revival due to their potential status as durables. Thompson does not mention retro or similar phenomena in his descriptions of antiques and the historicist interest in things of the past - taken literally, his model is also fairly strict in describing the polemic and ironic durability of retro's objects. Retro objects would rather be in a transient phase between rubbish and durable as *ironic* durables and as objects of fashion containing an element of "planned obsolescence." Still, the rubbish theory introduces the "thingishness" of retro and points to some central characteristics of the objects of modern culture. Their value is not constant, but changes and goes through phases of uncertainty. It would also be easy to imagine a different meaning and status of an object in one context (say, in a traditional crafts museum, in a shop, or, in an unadorned jumble sale) than another (in the retro shop or the popular flea market). This situation resonates with the "context theory" or "institution theory", according to which the art object is defined as art through its placement in the context of the art world (Arthur C. Danto (1992) and George Dickie (1974)).

Over time, things circulate through space as well as through social contexts, and arguably these movements are getting increasingly rapid and complex. Production zones are usually experienced as being far removed from the trendsetting Western societies in the "post-industrial society" (Daniel Bell) where the "global culture industry" (Scott Lash and Celia Lury) keeps producing symbols and brands that metamorphose and move across borders. According to Jean Baudrillard, the thing-world is characterized by the *simulacra*: the copy images without original, and the new media constantly creates complex relations between originals and copies, authenticity and fakes, objects and media. We constantly experience a *changed materiality* of our everyday surroundings: today this materiality may have changed from what it was even only a few years ago. In all its different forms, retro is an accentuation of this experience of *changed materiality* and thingness: the object must appear with a primarily aesthetic but also material association with the recent past, and it must provide an experience of difference from the present. Again, it should be emphasized that retro is defined as neither the replica nor the authentic object. Also, retro is not



only concerned with material objects, but with elements of visual style, and practices and acts of language. Retro, then, occurs when *then* and *now* are juxtaposed in a *materialized* form.

### **Material Culture: The study of things**

Modern objecthood is often recognized as a delicate matter. “Much like sex in the Victorian period, objects are nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt. They exist, naturally, but they are never given a thought, a social thought” (Latour 2005, 73). In this way the French multidisciplinary thinker Bruno Latour accentuates the uncertain status of objects in modern culture, where thingness in academic thinking as well as in cultural practice has been attributed with *lowness*. This is particularly the case with the thing-world of modernity itself and the mass-produced things of industrialization. As Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen sums up in his book *In Defence of Things* (2010), “[t]hings were increasingly seen as a threat against authentic human and social values,” playing the “villain’s role as humanism’s ‘other’” while *freedom* and *emancipation* were given a “powerful and persistent definition” as “that which escapes the material” (Olsen 2010, 12). It is the modern things in particular that take on this villain’s role in intellectual thinking: “Numerous philosophers and social theorists saw the emergence of the mass-produced, mass-distributed and mass-consumed object from the late nineteenth century onwards as a sign of an illusory and deceptive world. The new consumer capitalism, filling the world with goods, replicas, machines, and inhuman technology, became the incarnation of our inauthentic, estranged and alienated modern being” (Olsen 2010, 11). All the new things of modernity have paradoxically created a myth of immateriality as a consequence of the modern, as encompassed in Karl Marx’s statement “All that is solid melts into air,” which was made into the essence of the modern experience by philosopher Marshall Berman (1982).<sup>19</sup>

But obviously, modern life is as material as ever, as the configuration of things around us is changing fast and steadily, constantly bringing new things into being and requiring new modes of acting, living and incorporating those things. To elaborate on Berman’s statement, the experience of our world is one of changing things and of *changed materiality*. Retro expresses this modern

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<sup>19</sup> “To be modern, I said, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one’s own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.” (*All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, The Experience of Modernity*, Verso ninth edition, p. 345-346).

experience of things and accentuates the difference felt in things from even the very recent past. Giving attention to such things, retro also makes *things* visible and gives them social attention. Retro is thus deeply embedded in the complex questions of modern materiality and the meaning of objecthood today.

I will suggest that the new attention to materiality and *things* expressed by retro is also present in academia. The academic scene and its book market “now sparkles with interdisciplinary anthologies and special issues about artifacts and things, space and architectures, technologies and other materialities,” as stated in one of these books.<sup>20</sup> This new material interest has even been nominated as a “material turn”<sup>21</sup> across the disciplines. It is more or less institutionalized in the field of *material culture studies* that arose in the 1980s in disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology. The English anthropologist Daniel Miller, one of the names most associated with material culture and editor of the *Journal of Material Culture* (1996-), already in 1983 described the movement as follows: “By the study of material culture, I mean simply the study of human social and environmental relationships through the evidence of people’s construction of their material world.” This study “applies equally to the aspects of ethnography that analyze the production, consumption and symbolism of contemporary artefacts as well as to the archeologist uncovering the material evidence of past societies” (Miller 1983 in Pearce 1994, 13). In other words, material culture studies should contain both the thing-based and the culture-based approach. The new interest in the material is arguably motivated by the complex status of the material in the contemporary world, where materiality is not a matter of simple categorization or a given scheme. This also causes a blurring of traditional disciplinary boundaries, uniting different fields such as art history, media studies, archaeology and sociology in the study of thingness and materiality.

In its parent disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, material culture was an expression of a way of thinking *things* beyond their sheer functionality or as singular material entities. According to archaeologist Christopher Tilley, the ‘decisive breakthrough’ of material culture came with the *postprocessual archaeology* developed by Ian Hodder and others, presented

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<sup>20</sup> (“sprudler nu med tværfaglige antologier og temanumre artefakter og genstande, rum og arkitekturer, teknologier og andre materialiteter”), Tine Damsholt og Dorthe Gert Simonsen: *Materialiseringer. Processer, relationer og performativitet i Materialiseringer. Nye Perspektiver på materialitet og kulturanalyse*, Aarhus Universitetsforlag 2009, 9.

<sup>21</sup> The *material turn* is identified by James A. Knapp and Jeffrey Pence (2003) as consisting of two trends: “On the one hand, we see an enthusiasm for the material record, for “data” and “facts” as the basis for any enquiry and as an attempt to establish a scientific base for cultural study, while on the other hand, we identify a kind of theoretical prioritizing of materiality”. As an example of the latter the authors mention a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on “Things” from 2001, 656.

in *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (1982). The authors saw “the conception of material culture as a signifying system in which the external physical attributes of artefacts and their relationships are not regarded as exhausting their meaning” (Tilley 1994, 67). This expressed a contextual and cultural view of *things*, whose meanings were neither finite nor inherent. Instead of “reading the past,” the study of the past became an act of “writing the past” in the present, since the “meaning of the past does not reside in the past, but belongs in the present” (Tilley 1994, 73). This is of course an expression of a social constructivism that resonates with the currents of post-structuralism and postmodernism.

This theoretical and “textualist” approach has raised some criticism, questioning whether things really are so present in material culture. For example, the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren admits that the rise of material culture studies did not necessarily mean a “return to the material: a focus on the materiality of objects, things, commodities. On the contrary, we have often returned to focus on them as symbols icons, messages, texts” (Löfgren 1997, 103). A focus on symbols has led to a total dominance of vision and sight as the medium through which we experience the world (Löfgren 1997, 102), and to a one-way reading of the past. Löfgren does not reject material culture studies, but reminds us that the way things really are used should be studied: “What do people actually do with things? Not only how do they look or gaze at them, read them or contemplate them, but they may also touch, smell and taste them; people drag objects around, use, wear, fix, repair and maintain them, grow tired of them, put them away, discard them and recover them” (Löfgren 1997, 103). This is an important lesson for the study of retro, which should not be the mere observation of a series of objects, but a study of how they are lived in relation, made use of, and literally discarded and recovered.

These criteria are to some extent met in the influential works of Daniel Miller. Miller has been at the center of material culture activities since the early 1980s with the program article “Things ain’t what they used to be” (1981), the book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987) and numerous studies on a wide range of things from clothing, cars, the internet, pottery and bridal rituals in Western societies, as well as societies in Trinidad, India and Indonesia. This wide range is reflected in Miller’s recent book on material culture: *Stuff* (2010). In this concluding book, the seemingly infinite range of “stuff” is treated with the incentive to “challenge our common-sense opposition between the person and the thing, the animate and inanimate, the subject and the object” (Miller 2010, 5). A widespread prejudice against stuff and the material is that it is ‘superficial,’ as a chasm is created between the exterior and the interior with a “depth ontology,” where “being – what

we truly are – is located deep inside ourselves in direct opposition to the surface,” (Miller 2010, 16) so that clothing, for example, is thought of as superficial rather than as part of the true self. This is expressed in most religions and philosophies, where “wisdom has been accredited to those who claim that materiality represents the merely apparent, behind which lies that which is real” (Miller 2010, 69) (see also the presence theory by Gumbrecht in Chapter 3).

In order to rethink the hierarchy of the depth ontology, Miller has developed a theory of *how* and *what* we become through things. He calls this process *objectification*, and it can be defined as “the way we enhance our capacity as human beings,” (Miller 2010, 59) or as the way the subject is created and developed in exchange with its surroundings, such as through processes of externalization and sublation (Miller 1987, 12). Drawing inspiration from Hegel, the relations between humans and stuff are seen as dialectical, where man is educated and formed in a relationship with stuff. Miller credits Marx with applying the dialectical thinking to the material world, but distances his objectification from Marx’s focus on the capitalist commodity, from the one-sided perspective of objects as instruments of oppression, and from the terminology of fetishism, reification and alienation. Miller states that “clearly stuff can be turned against us and become oppressive, but it is preferable to see this as a contradiction, rather than the only way to characterize our relationship with things” (Miller 2010, 60-61).

Another key point in Miller’s approach to things is his attention to what he calls “the humility of things,” the importance of the ‘blindingly obvious’ stuff that we do not see. The study of material culture, then, “implies that much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an environment that habituates and prompts us” (Miller 2010, 51). With the deliberately all-inclusive and undefinable concept of *stuff*, Miller argues that material (or *stuff*) is not opposite or “Other” to man. The “common-sense opposition between the person and the thing, the animate and the inanimate, the subject and the object” (Miller 2010, 5) should be exchanged for an understanding that “we too are stuff and our use and identification of material culture provides a capacity for enchanting, just as much as for submerging, our humanity” (Miller 2010, 6). In this way, Miller opposes the simplified idea that things are “alien” and drain away our humanity, as well as the idea that some cultures should have a more true relationship to things or that they are less materialistic (ibid).

Similarly, Olsen advocates a less hierarchical view of the relationship between the domains of humans and things. He does this by asking for a more “symmetrical” way of attending lifeworlds in the past and the present. This “symmetrical archaeology” is “founded on the premise

that things, all those enormously varied physical entities we by effective historical conventions refer to as ‘material culture,’ are beings alongside other beings such as humans, plants, and animals” that share certain material properties, “flesh” and “membership in the dwelt-in world” (Olsen 2010, 9). This is inspired by Bruno Latour’s thinking also arguing for a “symmetrical approach” and a *parliament of things* (Latour 1993) or *Dingpolitik* as suggested in the exhibition “Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy,” that Latour organized with Peter Weibel at ZKM in Karlsruhe in 2005. This symmetry is expressed in a statement like this: “Consider things, and you have humans. Consider humans, and you are by that very act interested in things. Bring your attention to bear on hard things, and they become gentle, soft or human. Turn your attention to humans, and see them become electric circuits, automatic gears or software. We cannot define precisely what makes some human and others technical [...]” (Latour 2000, 20). It also resonates with American philosopher Jane Bennett’s ideas of the *political* and *ecological* state of things. According to Bennett, while things/stuff do not live human lives, all matter should be seen as having a vibrant vitality that *does* a lot, has great significance in human politics and ecology, and is literally a part of each human being: “The quarantines of [dull] matter and [vibrant] life encourage us to ignore the vitality *of* matter and the lively powers *of* material formations, such as the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods or the way our trash is not ‘away’ in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak” (Bennett 2010, vii).

As these recent examples show, there is a current effort dedicated to thinking about things differently to avoid the insufficiency of former models. Many of these efforts stretch beyond the field of material culture studies and its mother disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology, and into philosophy, politics, and aesthetics. Concentrating on material culture, the strength of this field is its cultural contextualization of things, its recognition of things in human life, and its awareness of the importance of things in relation to the identities of individuals as expressed in Miller’s *objectification*. In its expansiveness, the field of material culture is sometimes felt as uncertain and infinite, which Miller himself does admit: “Material Culture thrives as a rather undisciplined substitute for a discipline: inclusive, embracing, original, sometimes quirky researches and observations” (Miller 2010, 1). There is not a finished methodology or theory to work from. Instead one must be compiled separately for each case depending on the types of *stuff* and viewpoints involved. Daniel Miller’s studies, for instance, are carried out on the basis of an anthropological focus on human behavior, sometimes in its most general sense. This might be

different when the object of study is materiality in its specific contexts, such as in the study of works of art, or when focus is on a specific practice such as retro culture. The inclusiveness of Miller's objectification could be criticized for its apparent approval of any kind of consumption and its apparent view that any kind of *living with things* is equally good and non-criticizable. With that in mind, I will at this point present a more specific, compound approach that is more relevant for an understanding of retro.

### Things as Materializations

For a more detailed and operationalized version of materiality, I will present an approach to the expanded field of things by Danish anthropologists Tine Damsholt, Dorthe Gert Simonsen and Camilla Mordhorst. In their book *Materialiseringer* (2009) they formulate a concept of processual *materializations* ("materialiseringer") as an alternative to material culture. Where older models tends to view material culture as things or artifacts that can be described by their form, function and meaning (as suggested by Danish ethnographer Bjarne Stoklund 2003), "materializations", on the other hand entail that things are encountered as being "processual, relational and performative" ("processuelt, relationelt og performativt" (Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 14)). Thus, the current turn towards the material does not deal with finite objects that can be weighed, measured and described on their own, and neither does it concern the Marxist idea of materiality as an ontologically given basis that determines the cultural and social superstructure. Rather, materiality is seen as something that is "mobilized, translated, stabilized, joined together or folded in networks – without a autonomous creator or acting subject behind it" (Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 15). "Materializing" should thus be understood as "an active verb with a focus on practice and on how phenomena are done and redone in always ongoing processes" (ibid.).<sup>22</sup>

These processes are described under three headings. The first is *Materialization as process and agency*. This "underscores the temporal qualities of materiality, the materiality's interaction or entangling with other forms of being, where materiality is understood as something that can act in or have an impact on the world"<sup>23</sup> (Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 16). For example, a work of art is created with materials such as canvas and paints as a materialization

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<sup>22</sup> "materialitet som noget, der mobiliseres, oversættes, stabiliseres, sammenføjes, eller foldes i netværk – uden at der står et suværent skabende eller handlende subjekt bag. Materialisering skal forstås som et aktivt verbum, hvor der fokuseres på, hvordan fænomener gøres og gøres om i altid igangværende processer".

<sup>23</sup> "understreger materialitetens tidslige kvaliteter, det materielles interaktion eller sammenfiltning med andre former for væren, hvor materialitet forstås som noget, der kan handle i eller påvirke verden".

of the artist's ideas, which also reflects the cultural context, etc. Over time, the properties of its material constellation determine its "life" in the culture, but also the museum or gallery spaces which form around it and imbue it with a special sociality. The meaning of the painting will change over time too, constantly entangling and interacting with other forms of being. At the same time, the work of art influences individuals as well as the creation of other artworks.

As the authors acknowledge, all this builds upon several influences that reach across many disciplines. One of these is the perspective of a 'material flow' described by Tim Ingold (*The Temporality of the Landscape*, 1993). The material flow describes how a changing composition of things makes up a unity such as a landscape. Another key source of inspiration is the theory of "the social life of things" that Arjun Appadurai and Ivan Kopytoff introduced in 1986 to describe how objects circulate and are recontextualized as commodities (I shall return to this theory later on for further discussion). Daniel Miller explains that we are formed as individuals in constant relation to things – cf. the aforementioned objectification - which is a process that always involves a 'material mirror': "We cannot become who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in the material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us" (Miller 2005: 8, here from Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 18). A related issue is formulated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Eelco Runia in their *presence theory*, which focuses on presence rather than hermeneutic meaning as an overlooked but necessary way of approaching things and culture (see Chapter 3). Also mentioned are Donna Haraway's *hybridfigures* and *naturecultures* and their aim of rethinking the relationship between nature and culture.

The author's second heading, *Materialization as relation, network and rhizome*, focuses on "versions of materiality as 'relational effects,' i.e. complex and intertwined phenomena instead of essential and delimited entities" (ibid). This is highly related to the *Actor-network theory* (ANT), which is defined by the sociologist John Law as the viewpoint that "[e]ntities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relation with other entities," with a "relational materiality" as a central interpretation (Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 23). A central example here is the production and promotion of French wines, where the attribution to the "terroir," among many other factors, determines the identity of the wine (as described by Høyrup and Munk in "Vinens Geografi" in the anthology).

The third heading is *Materialization as performativity*. Here materialities are explained as something that is "deposited, versioned, materialized in practice – a socio-material practice" ("der aflejres, versioneres, materialiseres i praksis – en sociomateriel praksis," Damsholt,

Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 26). The inspiration for this performative approach comes especially from gender studies and the performative understanding of gender and body formulated by Judith Butler (1990). According to Butler the material body is formed and deposited through a process of changing ideas. Here, Butler could be criticized for not properly involving materiality and *things* as pointed out by Dutch ethnographer and philosopher Annemarie Mol. In *The Body Multiple* (2002) Mol states that “Performing identities is not a question of ideas and imaginations devoid of materiality [...] a lot of *things* are involved” (Moll 2002, Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst 2009, 28). This approach sees the phenomenon as taking place in “a plurality of practices.” Hence, materiality is accomplished differently in different forms of practice. These different forms should not be understood as separate and autonomous, but as connected. Phenomena must be seen in the whole of their complexity, as they are different things at the same time. For example, a Soviet monument in Tallinn is “deposited, versioned, materialized in a socio-material practice” and performs differently among ethnic Russians and Estonians (the example is from Lene Otto: “Kommunismens ubekvemme kulturarv” in the anthology).

I find these headings very productive to work with in order to establish an ideal approach to retro and its many things and practices. Retro is a cultural nomination happening to things, but is also based on things and presupposes the presence of things. Retro objects cannot easily be defined through form, function and meaning, since retro happens over time as a process that is deposited, versioned, and materialized in socio-material practices. Retro is generally well understood as a *materialization*. A chair might be *materialized* as “retro” or “Mid-century Modern,” rather than simply as “old-fashioned,” and a newly produced R&B song might use 1970s keyboards, handclaps and vintage recording technologies in order to *materialize* a retro-sounding piece of music. These are obviously processes *with things, happening to and with things*, through which they are continuously becoming “retro.” And retro objects constantly acquire new attributes, meanings and values in relations and through networks with other things and processes. Finally, retro is a performative practice that deposits, versions and materializes its component parts through socio-material practice, and it is obviously a performance of identity with a lot of things involved. My cases will use this perspective when describing the materializations of retro in the specific contexts and when analyzing how different kinds of objects interact with and contribute to cultural identities.



## The social life of things

The understanding of materializations explained above provides a fruitful perspective on the objects of retro. The challenges will be in the expansiveness and open-ended nature of the field, and the danger of forgetting the negative sides in the relationship with things, such as power relations, alienation and exploitation. I will meet these challenges by adding to the object perspective considerations on the social and cultural circulation of things.

As a starting point, I will use the theories of “the social life of things” formulated by anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Ivan Kopytoff. This social perspective on *things* is developed using elements from the influential thinking of Pierre Bourdieu. I will also comment upon the concept of culture and its contemporary meanings and discuss the notions of culture that have framed the reception of retro, and to which even retro itself often refers.

This analysis of the social dimension of things takes the aspects of value and power into closer examination. The kind of thing that is most often seen as the most essential in modern society is the commodity: the mass-produced and market-distributed object. This enormous category of objects is usually defined by its exchange value. The exchangeable status of the commodity is the basis for its “social life,” as described by Arjun Appadurai in “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” which opened the anthology *The Social Life of Things* (1986). Here, the social exchange is seen as crucial for understanding ‘commodities’: objects of value in any society. Appadurai draws upon Marx (whose exact understanding of the commodity is “difficult, contradictory and ambiguous” as Appadurai admits) and sees the commodity as having “use value for others.” But the main influence is Georg Simmel’s understanding of value as “not an inherent property of objects but about them by subjects” and that a commodity is “anything intended for exchange” (Appadurai 1986, 3 and 9). This provides an essentially social understanding of commodities, and the “commodity situation” is understood as something that happens to things at a certain time, but which is not inherent in them. “I propose *the commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature*” (Appadurai 1986, 13). The commodity situation can then be “disaggregated into: (1) the commodity phase of the social life of any thing; (2) the commodity candidacy of any thing; and (3) the commodity context in which any thing might be placed” (Ibid.).

Appadurai thus strengthens the material culture studies’ understanding of things as having social meaning and even ‘social life.’ His perspective is supplemented by Igor Kopytoff

(also in *The Social Life of Things*) who works with a concept of “the cultural biography of things.” Kopytoff’s understanding of things is also focused on the social, exchange-based commodity and thus the processual: commoditization is a social process and the production of commodities is “also a cultural and a cognitive process” (Kopytoff 1986, 64). Thinking in “object biographies” will consider the processual meaning of the object and how it is “a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986, 68). It is a means to understand “a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects” (Kopytoff 1986, 67). Importantly, objects must be seen as having different biographies. Similar to how a person will have multiple biographies (psychological, professional, political, familial, economic, etc.) each of which focuses on certain aspects and discards others, objects too are given different biographies through their social lives. Some might be purely technical or economic while others are cultural. For example, a car will have a technical biography, based on its manufacture and on the repair work that may subsequently be carried out on it. It will also have an economic biography, which begins when the car is sold and exchanged, and it will further have social and cultural biographies based on its ownership, use and aesthetic significance. Kopytoff points out that this biographic approach applies to modern objects of mass production as well as to objects that are conventionally perceived as unique, such as the arts and crafts. Retro is a perfect illustration of this and provides *things* with a new and often literal biography. As described in Chapter 5, a retro shop might add small signs to each object describing its origin, thus investing it with a cultural biography – and placing it in a new commodity situation. Kopytoff’s approach also indicates that objects are thought of in different ways according to their contexts and that the exchange of objects happens in specific fields. To explore this further, I will briefly discuss the social life of things in the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological work.

### **Bourdieu and the cultural object**

The influence of Pierre Bourdieu on the study of modern culture and its things and identities has been enormous. I will not provide an in-depth account of the extent of that influence here, but I will describe a few characteristics of the cultural sociology of Bourdieu and hereby bring his special system of terminology into use.

An essential point of Pierre Bourdieu's thinking is that "matters of aesthetics, taste and style clearly transcend the idiosyncrasies of individual agency, instead operating as manifestations of socialization and power relations in the form of 'cultural capital'" (Clarke and Miller 2002: 192). Thus, culture is ultimately a social battlefield determined by power relations. Culture is always stratified and defined by the *habitus* of the individual. Habitus is a concept that describes how the worldview of the individual, and thus its choices and actions are generated by internalized dispositions for feeling, thinking and acting in specific ways (Wilken 2011: 44). The habitus determines and connects all aspects of life (including the body), is largely unconscious and is formed through social experience. The notion of habitus can help explain why certain things without obvious reasons are possible for some and not for others. In our context, for example, why some individuals can own an object, say a 1970's chair, and see it as fashionable retro, while other owners of the same chair just see it as a chair to sit in or as trash.

Another of Bourdieu's important concepts is *the field*: the different arenas of social life, each with their own logics and rules for the game of social struggle, including for example the cultural field, the academic field and the religious field. This awareness of fields can be seen as a break with the "idea of economism": the conception that all struggles in society are driven by the same logic and have the same goals (Wilken 2011, 53). In the analysis of a specific phenomenon it is then important to identify the logic of the field in question and to understand the struggles for defining the field in a specific way. One example is the field of fashion, which has been described by Bourdieu in the essay "Haute Couture and Haute Culture" (1974). Fashion is based on a great "transmuting economically and symbolically": it is pure "transubstantiation" when one perfume can be sold for three francs in a supermarket, while a similar one goes for thirty francs when it bears the label Chanel (Bourdieu 1993, 137). Thus, the importance of defining fashion and *the field* is obvious. This is done with seemingly different means, as when the conservative designer Pierre Balmain promotes his fashion by conventional strategies and dresses his products with adjectives like "luxurious," "exclusive," "magnificent," "traditional," "sophisticated," "exquisite," and "durable," whereas the alternative designer Jean-Louis Scherrer employs a strategy of revolution with words like "over-smart," "kitschy," "humoristic," "sympathetic," "fun," "dazzling," "free," "enthusiastic," "structured," and "functional" (Bourdieu 1997, 202-203). Despite the seemingly contradictory strategies, these designers work in the same field, "race towards the same goal and [share an] implicit recognition of that goal" (Bourdieu 1993, 135).

The third central concept is that of *capital*, and particularly of *cultural capital*, which is one of four overall types of capital – the others being economic, social, and symbolic capital, respectively – that provide individuals with influence and power in society. In *Forms of Capital* (1983) cultural capital is described as having three forms: an embodied, an objectified and an institutionalized form. The embodied form is made up of the cultural dispositions of the individual – its choices and habits of culture. The objectified form consists of cultural objects like paintings, books or buildings that can be possessed or accessed with the aid of economic capital, and it can also mean the individual's habitual sense for using these objects in the right way. The institutionalized form of cultural capital represents diplomas, titles and awards from educational or professional institutions (Wilken 2011, 59-60).

The nature of cultural capital is analyzed in *Distinction*, (1979) with its dissection of 'taste' in modern French society. This analysis of the cultural habits was produced on the basis of a questionnaire-based survey that was carried out in 1963 and 1967-68 with the aim of mapping the cultural preferences of different classes. Participants were grouped into three classes (working, middle, and upper) and could choose, for instance, between different kinds of motifs in the pictorial arts or in pieces of music, from *The Blue Danube* to Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand* (Table 1, Bourdieu 2010: 7). Bourdieu's statistics for different kinds of cultural preferences create an image that underscores his conclusion about "the very close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and secondarily, to social origin (measured by father's occupation)" (Bourdieu 2010: 5). The clearness of this picture might fit with the cultural landscape of 1960s France with its class divisions and matching cultural hierarchy, but it is difficult to compare it to contemporary culture. Especially when it comes to popular culture and its aesthetics. A broadly recognized development in Western culture since the 1960s has been the discarding of some of the *stratifications* of culture: the "highly differentiated vocabularies of cultural taste correlated with a hierarchy of class and status" (Chaney 2002, 39). Bourdieu obviously bases his analysis on such a stable system, for example classical music and painting being markers of bourgeois culture, and the recognition of an easily identifiable working class culture. Thus, Bourdieu's depiction of distinction in 1960s French society might be read for the evidence of changes in culture since then, rather than as a portrayal of contemporary cultural conditions. However, his thinking can also be applied to take these changes into account. In which case, the process of distinction could be analyzed as moving into new territories and involving new practices and things such as through the "aestheticization of everyday life" (Featherstone 1991) and

“No-brow culture” (Seabrook 2000) (both introduced later), thus adapting Bourdieu’s concepts to contemporary culture.

To the benefit of studies of retro and objects in culture, Bourdieu’s thinking creates a system where all kinds of objects and practices are included, and given importance as a means of power and recognition. The observation of different fields and their different logics and rules are useful and may potentially contribute to a qualified understanding of cultural phenomena. The logic of retro as a phenomenon in the subcultural/popular cultural field makes it different from what it would be if it belonged solely to the art field or within the field of fashion. The challenge on the one hand is to identify the field, and on the other to account for the possibility of phenomena overlapping multiple fields. Furthermore, the strict system of Bourdieu’s thinking has many dead ends. Objects and practices do not possess much agency, and their meanings are rather fixed. As regards individual identity and the role of *things*, Bourdieu’s thinking must be characterized as determinist. The individual is predestined to deal with certain kinds of things and invest them with a symbolic meaning in relation to his or her habitus, while the things themselves are classified into specific contexts where they are given settled social and cultural meanings.

After all, it could be argued, retro is a new-definition of things originally meant for another context. There is no place for such kinds of reflective games in Bourdieu’s system: His overall perspective dictates that something always lies behind individual’s preferences for specific *things* over others and their use of these *things*, and that all areas of the lifeworld are tied together in determining way. Nothing escapes this system as innocent or independent. While it is often relevant and productive to think of all aspects of life, for example body culture or food, as being embedded in socio-cultural life and its distinctions – and tied to individual’s desire to obtain certain statuses - it does also involve a danger of drawing simplified conclusions and ignoring other factors. Individual style and individual’s possibilities of “breaking the mold” are not considered much (even though Bourdieu’s own biography is an obvious case of this). Neither is the reflexive consciousness of a practice among its practitioners which is important in a field such as art and arguably in many kinds of culture. Sociologist David Chaney emphasizes this lack of ‘reflexivity’ as a significant point of criticism concerning modern lifestyles. “The very prescriptive determinism of his concept of habitus does not allow him [Bourdieu] to fully appreciate the ways in which actors may and will play with these choices as ironic commentaries on their own styles of life” (Chaney 1996: 66). A (sub)culture with low-class and minority roots such as hip-hop, for instance, uses an ironic

reference to the stereotype of its image as a main component. Similarly, retro continuously questions connoisseurship as well as subcultural meanings.

Bourdieu's system also contains an idea of a *dominant culture* (the bourgeois high culture) with other groups' cultures, such as working class culture, being the repressed and inferior *dominated cultures*. This reduces the dominated cultures to signifying nothing but their own inferiority and ignores those "autonomous and creative styles of life, which are not negative or second-hand versions of dominant culture, and which are not reducible to function or utility" (Grignon and Passeron 1985, quoted from Elsie Baker 2013, 43). I will go further into this by discussing certain notions of culture that dominate the reception of retro. In the terminology of Bourdieu, these can be seen as forming *fields*, determining a different reading of retro depending on if it is seen as expressing "the resistance of subculture," or, "the pacifying popular culture."

## Concepts of culture

Moving from the perspective of things to the perspective of culture, I find it important to introduce the concept of culture and to understand its complex character before delving into its special varieties. Even more profoundly than the study of *things*, the study of culture has dominated the sciences and humanities, and a number of tendencies and orientations have together assumed the status of a new Kuhnian paradigm (Burke 2008: 51), often identified as *the cultural turn*. Doris Bachmann-Medick identifies the cultural turn as an "underlying reorientation of 'culture'" where "the scientific, often positivistic and economical explanations of the social is dissolved and a fundamental reassessment of symbolism, language and representation has come instead"<sup>24</sup> (Bachmann-Medick 2006, 13). The many notions of culture often have a re-evaluating agenda as in the discipline *cultural studies* and a role of describing something new or newly relevant. Danish philosopher Hans Fink begins an article on the cultural concept from 1988 by stating, "The concept of culture is used in a way that is partly groping and partly cocksure to grasp a whole totality in an attempt to operationalize something that in the previous understanding and practice has been

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<sup>24</sup>"Eine grundsätzliche Umorientierung auf "Kultur" ("Cultural Turn") angestoßen worden sind, wodurch sie szientistische, oft positivistische und ökonomische Erklärungen des Sozialen abgelöst und eine grundlegende Neubewertung von Symbolisierung, Sprache, und Repräsentation auf dem Weg gebracht hatte.," Doris Bachmann-Medick: *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Rowolhts Verlag 2006., p. 13 (translated by K. Handberg).

marginalized as unimportant, superfluous or ineffective.”<sup>25</sup> This is indeed the case for the categories of culture I will discuss further on, such as subcultures and popular culture. According to Fink, culture is a ‘hypercomplex’ concept: “A word qualifies as a hypercomplex concept if it contains a universe of significance that contains components of meaning which, when seen isolated are in internal contradiction or situated at incompatible levels, but which simultaneously have an indelibly uniform character and an imperative inner coherence.”<sup>26</sup> Through its history of use it must have accrued specializations, limitations and separations, which at some point have been brought together again. This is the essence of the cultural history of the concept of culture and its current reception.

Danish literary and cultural historian Johan Fjord Jensen outlines the history of the concept of culture through three layers or stages (Jensen 1988). In the first and etymologically original layer culture - derived from the Latin term *cultura* - was connected only with notions of agriculture and its cultivation. From here, it was expanded to represent man’s cultivation of himself. At this second stage, *Cultura* became the ‘*Cultura animi*’ of Cicero, and further to Thomas Moore’s “culture [...] of their minds” in the English tradition, while entering the German tradition with Humboldt’s definition of “die Ergebnisse und Leistungen der menschlichen Schöpferkräfte in bildener Kunst, Litteratur, Musik” (“the efforts and achievements of human creativity in pictorial arts, literature, music”) (Fjord Jensen 1988, 162). The third layer emerges from Herder’s understanding of culture as a totality which leads up to the anthropology of the 20th century. Here, “culture [is] not first and foremost an expression of the human civilizing activity of creation and not merely a part in their individual and universal education; it is the synthesis of its whole socially determined and transmitted reality as expressed in *individual* cultures” (Fjord Jensen 1988, 162-163). Paradoxically, this layer contains the Nationalistic Awakening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its understanding of the national community of culture, as well as the proto-multicultural understanding of different cultures of anthropology, and the socialist, anti-bourgeois understanding of culture famously expressed by the Danish social-democrat Hartvig Frisch as “Culture is habits”

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<sup>25</sup> ”Kulturbegrebet bruges til dels famlende dels skræmsikkert at gribe efter en helhed i et forsøg på at operationalisere noget, som i den hidtidige forståelse og praksis har været udgrænset som ligeegyldigt, overflødigt eller virkningsløst,” Hans Fink: *Et hyperkomplekst begreb: Kultur, kulturbegreb og kulturel relativisme 1*, in Hans Hauge and Henrik Horstbøll: *Kulturbegrebets Kulturhistorie*, Aarhus Universitetsforlag 1988., 9.

<sup>26</sup> ”Et ord svarer til et hyperkomplekst begreb, såfremt det har et betydningsunivers, som rummer betydningskomponenter, der isoleret betragtet er i indbyrdes modstrid eller på uforenelige niveauer, men som samtidig har et uudsletteligt enhedspræg og en uafviselig indre sammenhæng” (Fink: 1988, 22).

(“*kultur er vaner*”) in *Europas Kulturhistorie* from 1928, or by British culture critic Raymond Williams as “a whole way of life” (*Culture is Ordinary*, 1958).

As an illustration of the complexity of the concept of culture, Fink mentions that the American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn have listed 164 explicit definitions of culture, exclusively from the anthropological and sociological literature in English (and this in 1952, well before the cultural turn) (Fink 1988, 11). This demonstrates the wide range of the term culture and its many uses. It is now necessary to investigate those specific uses of the term that are particularly relevant for the study of retro. These versions address the specific conditions and developments in modern culture and encompass the cultural context of retro’s materiality, as well as that of the retro practice itself. Their formulation has even been manifest in the academic approach to culture, and reflects the academic Cultural Turn in their intense study.

### **Subculture: Resistance through *Bricolage***

Subculture as a concept is in itself emblematic for a new understanding of culture and The Cultural Turn’s shift towards an emphasis on symbolization, language and representation. The concept of subculture is wide-ranging, as it can characterize any delimited subarea inside a presupposed “main” culture. Most often it implies an experience of division between the subarea and the dominant culture, and it is indeed such an awareness of contrast, conflict, and even active resistance that characterize the classic studies of subculture. This idea of subculture is especially associated with the *Birmingham School* type of cultural studies associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which existed from 1964 to 2002 at the University of Birmingham. Taking its starting point in working class studies, the centre carried out a series of influential studies of youth culture and, later, of minority culture. These studies were characterized by their critical stance towards the conventional study of social deviance in youth culture, as in criminology, and a corresponding political criticism of the government policies and media representations of youth and crime. This was motivated by an understanding of deviance – including the cultural deviance of youth cultures - as rational and understandable reactions to, or defense against, the oppression of capitalist society. Thus, such deviances, particularly the ones organized in subgroups and cultures, were seen as expressions of resistance against the capitalist oppression that contained potential for politicizing (Bai and Drotner 1986, 9).



This perspective was expressed in the seminal work *Resistance Through Rituals* (ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson) from 1976: a collection of readings of contemporary youth culture, here demonstratively called subculture.<sup>27</sup> Here culture is defined as:

That level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give expressive form to their social and material life experience ... “‘culture’ is the practice which realizes or objectivates group-life in meaningful shape and form ... The ‘culture’ of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive ‘way of life’ of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life. Culture is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social organization of life expresses itself.

(Hall and Jefferson 1976, p. 10).

This understanding and concept of culture builds on Raymond Williams (“relations between elements in a whole way of life”), but strengthens the focus on conflict, class, and the ruling culture’s attempts to dominate deviant forms. Thus, another inspiration was Antonio Gramsci’s concept of *cultural hegemony*: the attempt of the ruling class to naturalize their power not through violence but through cultural consensus.

As historically specific studies of youth subcultures in post-war Britain, the Birmingham School expressed a general social and political criticism. Youth cultures were viewed both in relation to the cultures of the social classes (working, middle, or upper class) - called the *parent cultures*, since they would typically be the cultures of the youths’ parents - and to the dominating culture, meaning the ruling political and commercial culture. Thus, the subcultures made use of a “double articulation” towards both of these fields (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 15). The subcultures were seen as especially articulated to the changes in postwar affluence. This was the direct cause for the emergence of youth and “teenagers” - the first appearance of the word

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<sup>27</sup> The Birmingham School of subculture studies is mainly associated with a body of four works: Hall and Jefferson: *Resistance Through Rituals* (published as a book in 1976, but the year before as “Working Papers in Cultural Studies nos 7/8”), Mungham and Pearson: *Working Class Youth Culture* (1976), Paul Willis: *Profane Culture* (1979) and Dick Hebdige: *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979).

“teenager” on print seems to be in 1941<sup>28</sup> - as a distinct group with a special experience to articulate, and with the means to do so. The teenager was the target of a new entertainment industry, as described in sociologist Mark Abrams’ analysis *The Teenage Customer* in 1959. Young people now had twice as much money for consumer spending as they had had in 1939, and this made it plausible to talk about “distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage ends in a distinctive teenage world,” as Abram’s analysis has it (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 18).

Another important factor behind the formation of these subcultures was the emergence of “mass communications, mass entertainment, mass art and mass culture” (ibid). This created new forums and weakened older ones like the traditional working class culture. World War II, which had ended only recently, was emphasized, since as a generational experience it took away the fathers and kept the rest of society in a state of emergency (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 19). Especially the more violent youth cultures, such as those of the *teddy boys*, can be seen in light of this violent epoch. A more civil result that Hall and Jefferson point to is that as young people spent a longer time in the educational system – and more youths did so – educational institutions held alternative possibilities for collective experience and group formation. Finally, the authors admit that the stylistic creations in fashion, as well as phenomena like rock music were important and in themselves generative for the spread of subcultures (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 20) - even though the subcultures were also seen as reactions to mass culture. Subcultures thus specifically belong to modern, post-war society, and the examples most referred to, such as rockers, teds, mods, skinheads and punks, are primarily connected to the period from 1950 to 1980.

While I will not elaborate further on the more social and political dimensions that were an important part of the original studies, I will now focus on the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of subculture and particularly the idea of *revival*, which has been described as an important feature of subcultural styles and activities by John Clarke and Dick Hebdige.

John Clarke’s article “Style” (in Hall, Jefferson 1976) discusses the semiotic background for the analyses of subcultures. From Claude Levi-Strauss he borrows the term *bricolage* in order to describe how styles are formed. Bricolage is “[t]he re-ordering and re-contextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings, within a total system of significances, which also includes prior and sedimented meanings attached to the objects used” (John Clarke

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<sup>28</sup> Even though reference to a person in his teens have been in use before, the first use printed of the word ‘teenager’ is usually dated to a 1941 article in *Popular Science* and first turned up on a book title in 1945 and soon spread into the world of advertising. Thomas Hine: *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, Avon Books, New York, 1999, p. 8.

1976, 177). To a wide extent, style and subculture are created by reusing objects and attributing new meaning to them. The studies of subculture mention examples such as teddy boys' use of Edwardian jackets, mods' use of 'nice' clothes and Italian scooters, and the skinheads' use of working class clothes.

Clarke also describes how such processes are able to move in the opposite direction as well, as when the stylistic characteristics of a subculture are appropriated by the mainstream culture. This happens through a *diffusion* of style, as when "[t]he whole mid-1960s explosion of 'Swinging London' was based on the massive commercial diffusion of what were originally known as Mod styles, mediated through such networks and finally into a 'mass' cultural and commercial phenomenon" (Clarke 1976, 187). He also describes this as a "commercial defusing of a particular style in order to make it widely marketable" (Clarke 1976, 188). Contrary to the cultural totality of the original subculture or a 'genuine grass-root appropriation,' the diffused and defused versions "evade the concrete realities of class" (ibid.) and as such must be seen as part of hegemony rather than as resistance towards it. The same criticism is raised about the idea of a generationally specific youth culture that downplays class-difference within the generation (ibid.).

Herein is revealed the troubled relation of the CCCS subculture studies to the concept of the youth revolution of the sixties as a *counter culture*<sup>29</sup>. This counter culture is referred to as one that is based on the middle class, and primarily it is "a host of various strands, connections and divergences within a broadly defined counter-culture milieu, rather than (with the exception of the drug and sexual sub-cultures) a sequence of tightly defined middle-class subcultures" (Hall, Jefferson 1978, 61-62). Hall and Jefferson describe it as having two distinct directions: "One via drugs, mysticism, the 'revolution in life-style' into Utopian alternative culture, or, the other way, via community action, protest action and libertarian goals, into a more activist politics" (ibid.) Nonetheless, it is still felt that the counter culture is too articulate itself and does not need the committed representation of the CCCS, or in a more critical light: it does not quite fit with the agenda of the CCCS project and with its associated, somewhat determinist culture theory. Also, these

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<sup>29</sup> The concept "counter culture" is attributed to Theodore Roszak and his book *The Making of a Counter Culture. Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (1968). Here, Roszak recognizes tendencies in contemporary youth culture as a collective resistance against the "technocratic" society in a rhetoric such as: "It strikes me as obvious beyond dispute that the interests of our college-age and adolescent young in the psychology of alienation, oriental mysticism, psychedelic drugs, and communitarian experiments comprise a cultural constellation that radically diverges from values and assumptions that have been in the mainstream of our society at least since the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century" (Roszak, 1968, p. xii).

subcultural studies have been criticized for being selective and for contradicting empiricism in favor of theory, as I will elaborate later on.

*Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) by Dick Hebdige is possibly the most widely read and circulated work of the Birmingham School. As its vantage point, *Subculture* makes use of a *visual semiotic reading*, according to which style is a “signifying practice.” On this background, Hebdige immediately recognizes the bricolage character of the recent punk subculture:

Punk reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in ‘cut-up’ form, combining elements which had originally belonged to completely different epochs. There was chaos on quiffs and leather jackets, brothel creepers and winkle pickers, plimsolls and paka macs, moddy crops and skinhead strides, drainpipes and vivid socks, bum freezers and bovver boots ... [P]unk style contained distorted reflections of all the major post-war subcultures.

(Hebdige 1979, p. 26)

Even though the theoretical background is structuralist and semiotic, the presence of *things* is felt in Hebdige’s analysis. He is also aware of the “work” invested in a subculture, for instance as a mod: “Scooters to be polished, records to be bought, trousers to be pressed, tapered or fetched from the cleaners, hair to be washed and blow-dried” (Hebdige 1979, 53). The overall perspective, however, is determinist, with subculture seen as a working class form of resistance. Still, the element of re-use in the subculture of punk is remarkable: “[L]ike every other youth culture, it was constituted through a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc. It was through these adapted forms that certain sections of predominantly working-class youth were able to restate their opposition to dominant values and institutions.” (Hebdige 1979, 116). Hebdige also finds that the strategies of the avant-garde, such as surrealism and Dadaist collage, are very much alive in the styles of the subcultures (Hebdige 1979, 120). In Hebdige’s view, these subcultures are comparable to the historical avant-gardes: idealist, well-defined groups in opposition to established society, engaged in a practice that seeks to unite art and life, as described by Peter Bürger (1974).

In his description of punk and other subcultures as appropriation-based and actively subversive, Hebdige lays the groundwork for a subcultural reading of retro. Following such an understanding, retro is seen as an appropriation of material from previous cultural contexts, given a new meaning that stands in contrast to previous meanings, with a potentially subversive status as its

result. Objects of mass-culture are made into statements of individuality, and commercial, disposable objects are kept and cherished as durables. Retro's objects come from mass culture as well as from subcultures, and retro does indeed contain the "distorted reflections of all the major post-war subcultures," including punk and later subcultures. This reflexivity, however, may be seen as a meta- or post subcultural phenomenon rather than an identification of retro as a subculture in the conventional sense. In Hebdige's approach, after all, participating in a subculture means taking on a full *life-identity* that is tied to a sociopolitical unity, which it would be hard to transfer to the contemporary, fragmented practice of retro. In the following I will discuss this post-subcultural character of retro culture – a discussion I will begin with a critique of subcultural theory.

### **Post subculture?**

Generally, the perception of subculture has changed considerably. Where subculture used to be a disregarded and undescribed area of culture that was looked at with mistrust, it has now become a popular and established field of study. Several previously subcultural manifestations are now publicly recognized and enjoy status as pieces of cultural heritage. For example, music by the Sex Pistols was played at the opening of the London Olympics in 2012, and the subcultural style of heavy metal was the image of Finnish Eurovision winners Lordi in 2006. Arguably, we may actually recognize the aesthetic properties of specific subcultures of the 1950s, 60s and 70s even more today, since 60s *mods*, 50s *greasers* and a lot of other youth cultures have been celebrated through revivals and have received general retro attention.

Posterity has criticized the Birmingham School for being too colored by their political commitment and structuralist method, which limited the reach of their observations and caused them to neglect the importance of the cultural context. The actual working class background of subcultural individuals analyzed by the Birmingham theorists has been questioned – and surely such a background must be necessary for a depiction of subculture as "pockets of working class resistance to the dominate hegemonistic individualism" (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2002, 1) to make any sense. So too has passed the idea that a singular subcultural identity should be the norm, or even possible. Simon Frith - another pioneer in the study of youth and popular culture, particularly through his sociology of rock music – has noted that "[m]ost working-class teenagers pass through groups, change identities, play their leisure roles for fun: other differences between them – sex, occupation, family – are much more significant than the distinctions of style. For every youth 'stylist' committed to a cult as a full time creative task, there are hundreds of working-class kids

who grow up in a loose membership of several groups and run a variety of gangs” (Frith, 1983, here from Bennett and Kahn Harris 2004, 8).

In recent years, a certain critical stance towards mentioning the concept of subculture in relation to contemporary youth culture has been spreading. This is expressed in titles such as *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (2004), *Beyond Subculture: Youth and Pop in a Multi-ethnic world* (2006), and *The Post-Subcultures Reader* (2001). What such titles are responding to is an uncertainty about the term subculture and the heavy heritage of the CCCS conception of it. The cultural and spatial coherence that “subculture” implies is experienced as incompatible with contemporary cultural conditions, in regard to both youth cultures and the global society with its rapid proliferation of images, fashions and lifestyles. As sociologist David Muggleton summarizes it in his book *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (2000), the 1980’s and 90s have been “decades of subcultural fragmentation and proliferation, with a glut of revivals, hybrids, and transformations, and the co-existence of myriad styles at one point in time” (Muggleton 2000, 47). This description includes retro as an obvious example and indicates that the “post-subculture understanding” is the adequate one for retro. Muggleton even suggests that the general historical understanding of the subculture concept belongs specifically to the decades around 1950-1980, roughly, with a following pre- and post-status.

While I will not debate the status of subculture as such, I will conclude that the understanding of subcultures associated with the Birmingham School is a prototype of modern cultural understanding, implying a character of resistance to the dominant culture through a signifying system of objects, symbols and practices. The thingness of subculture is one of DIY (“Do-it-yourself”) as well as bricolage: a reinterpretation of existing objects of modern culture. Examples include a punker’s old leather jacket with written statements, badges, and patches, and the use of an old industrial storehouse as the setting for an electronica subculture. This use of objects has definitely been important for the formation of retro, especially in the case of punk, which, as Hebdige states, referred heavily to the previous subcultures as well as to the mass culture and art movements of the then recent past. Retro is not a subculture in itself. Neither does it count as a specific identity, and nor is it necessarily connected to *youth* culture. Using retro style in the home, for instance, is typically practiced by people in their thirties and forties, according to Sarah Elsie Baker’s study (Baker 2013). “Retro subcultures,” such as the rockabilly revival, should also be seen as acts of staging certain aspects of subcultural identity (clothing, styling, music; even talking and body language) in a self-conscious reference to the historical model, but without

copying its sociocultural identity: the urban retro rockabillys have no pretensions of being rural proletarians or juvenile delinquents. In some cases the practice of retro by way of the rockabilly-revival is used by former punkers as a way of taking on a new and more subdued identity. Subculture does, however, play an important role for one strand in the reception of retro, which looks upon retro as a subversive phenomenon that at least bears some resemblance to the idea of resistance to ruling capitalist culture. Such an understanding may be illustrated through Bourdieu's *fields*: a particular arena of social life with its own special logic and rules. When verbalized as "subculture", retro would be understood as the logics and rules governing this field, such as being anti-commercial, subversive and self-organized. However, retro can also be identified as belonging to different fields with different logics and rules. Verbalized as "popular culture", retro is rather the reverse as commercial, regressive and corporate. To unfold this perspective, I will give a short presentation of the concept of popular culture and some essential approaches to the study of it.

### **Popular culture**

From the beginning, popular culture has been negatively and uncertainly defined, associated with much of the *lowness* of the modern materiality described previously. Popular culture is passive, even stupefying, and continually connected to commercialization, populism, and inauthenticity. British culture critic Raymond Williams, one of the first to study popular culture, has listed four common meanings of 'the popular': first, it can mean objects and practices "well liked by many people." Or, it can refer to objects and practices which are perceived as "inferior kinds of work," as often opposed to the works of high culture. It can also be aimed at "work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people," as in explicitly commercial or populist products. Finally, it can refer to "culture actually made by and for the people" (Williams 1983, here from Harrington and Bielby 2001, 2). Thus, "the popular" can describe several phenomena and perspectives, and its delimitation and distinctions can be discussed by way of these reactions. Popular culture is generally perceived as a modern concept associated with mass communications, mass entertainment, mass art and mass culture, and the vocabulary of industrialization ("culture industry," "culture production," "supply and demand") in contrast to the fine arts, crafts and folk culture of pre-industrial society.

The study of popular culture is generally characterized by contextual understanding. As such, popular culture is always understood and defined in relation to other fields, and to the production, distribution, and consumption of its objects and practices. This is expressed in the concept of "the circuit of culture," which is often mentioned as a frame of understanding for

popular culture. The concept was introduced in a textbook for the practice of cultural studies, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Case of the Sony Walkman* (by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, et al., 1997) in an analysis of a popular cultural emblem, the Sony Walkman, and its significance in contemporary culture. The cultural study of the Sony Walkman is carried out by means of a model of five stages: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. This circle (which can move in many directions) emphasizes that meaning is not inherent in the cultural object or even dictated by its producers. Compared to earlier Modernist and Marxist criticisms of the culture industry, this signals a shift in focus from *production* to *consumption* in the study of popular culture.

Throughout the fifty years where popular culture has been deliberately studied in academia, three 'schools' have been important: *Cultural Studies*, *The Production of Culture Studies*, and *Popular Culture Studies* (Harrington and Bielby 2001, 3-5). Cultural Studies, exemplified by the Birmingham School's studies of subcultures, accentuate conflicts, power relations, and how daily life is constructed, often involving a political commitment and an activist orientation. From a class-based focus (as in the subculture studies), Cultural Studies puts stress on markers of difference such as gender and ethnicity, often contrasting such identities to those of the dominant culture. The tradition of Cultural Studies carries an ambiguous relationship to popular culture: on the one hand it can be seen as a culture of the people, or of marginalized groups, that should be acknowledged, but on the other, it is also a tool of hegemonic oppression of the same people. This ambiguity is felt running through the Birmingham School's studies of subcultures as described above.

The second school, that of the Production of Culture, emerged from sociological studies in America in the 1970s (collected in two anthologies in 1976 by Richard A. Peterson and Lewis A. Coser), but had its roots in the thinking of Adorno and Horkheimer on the culture industry and on how the production forms of industry were applied to the area of culture. In this school's studies of, for instance, science laboratories, artist communities, and country music radio stations, the focus was on the production of cultural products, and on the social and economic systems in which the cultural area was embedded (Peterson and Anand 2004, 312). These studies of the production of culture are typically connected to the social sciences and business studies. Their focus is not on a cultural understanding of popular culture and its objects, but rather on the use of such products in society. Accordingly, a model developed by the school suggests structuring the analysis of the production of culture in six phases: technology, law and regulation, industry structure, occupational careers, organizational structure and market (Peterson and Anand 2004, 313-318). This approach, however, may also be used to analyze stylistic and aesthetic developments within a



given culture. For example, Richard A. Peterson uses the model to describe how rock music displaced swing bands and crooners to become the dominant form of U.S. popular music in the mid-1950s (Peterson 1990).

The third school is the explicitly called Popular Culture Studies that has been practiced with increasing intensity since the 1970s, often as its own discipline and with its own conferences and associations, such as the American Popular Culture Association ([pcaaca.org/](http://pcaaca.org/)). The defining element here is the choice of subject matter rather than a theoretical or ideological agenda. Among the pioneering examples of these direct approaches to popular culture are the studies of John Fiske on television culture in *Reading Television* (1979) and *Television Culture* (1987), and popular culture in general in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), as well as those of Ieng Ang in *Watching Dallas* (1985).

This development shows a growing acceptance of popular culture as an area that should be understood and studied in its own right, rather than viewed as a symptom of modern malaise. As an example of the practice of popular culture studies, the section of popular culture by Intellect Books (an academic publishing company with departments in the UK, USA and Canada) contains titles such as: *Atomic Postcards: Radioactive Messages from the Cold War*, *People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet*, *Fan Phenomena: Batman and Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology and Electronic Dance Music Culture*. Intellect also publishes fifteen journals categorized under popular culture.<sup>30</sup> Considering the strong interest in the subject, and the wide scope of material being produced, it seems relevant to raise discussions on the current studies of popular culture. In their anthology *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption* (2001) C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby list three general discussion points. These are: 1) the question of the origins of popular culture, 2) the debate between the activity or passivity of the popular culture consumer, and 3) the discussion of whether the observer should aesthetically or morally evaluate the subject (Harrington and Bielby 2001, 7).

Under the first point the chronological and cultural extension of popular culture is discussed. For example, the traditional association with modern mass production and mass entertainment is challenged in a title like Fred Schroeder's *5000 Years of Popular Culture* (1980). Here previous technologies, such as the casting moulds of antiquity and the 15th Century printing technique of Johann Gutenberg are proposed as examples of mass production and origins of popular

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<sup>30</sup> Intellect Ltd., [www.intellectbooks.com](http://www.intellectbooks.com) and "Popular Culture" catalogue, 2012.

culture. Also Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978) interprets popular culture as having roots back to the 'early modern' period between 1500 and 1800.

The second discussion centers on the extent to which popular culture expresses the interests of the people and to what extent they are active contributors to it. A further perspective on this would be to perceive popular culture as what people do with the products of the culture industry. Mass culture can then be understood as the repertoire, and popular culture as what people actually do with it: what is actually *done* with the commodities and commodified practices that people consume? (Storey 2009, 12.). This understanding, introduced by media scholar John Fiske, involves objects and practices, producers and recipients, and is thus relevant to retro - even if retro culture remains unique through its ironic staging of the *idea* of popular culture and consumption.

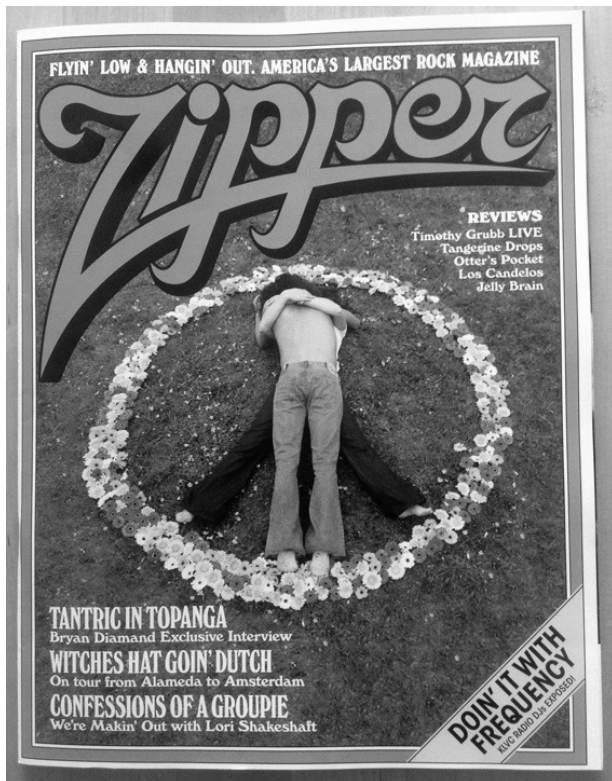
In relation to the third discussion, it is no longer legitimately necessary to have a moral agenda in order to deal with popular culture. None of the above mentioned titles from Intellect Books – brought up here as an example of a contemporary publisher focusing on popular culture studies - are guided by an aim of revealing injustice or protesting oppression. Nonetheless popular culture is brought into critical discussions of culture, as well as more general issues.

To these points, a discussion of whether the concept of popular culture is still valid or operative at all could be added. The distinction between high and low culture has eased dramatically since the time when the studies of popular culture first emerged, and the phenomena themselves often change as they move in and out of different cultural and social spheres. According to Dick Hebdige, the status of popular culture has changed radically: "In the West popular culture is no longer marginal, still less subterranean. Most of the time and for most people it simply is culture." Or in the words of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith: "[P]opular cultural forms have moved so far towards the center stage in British cultural life that the separate existence of a distinctive popular culture in an oppositional relation to high culture is in question" (both quoted from Storey 2009, 14). According to author and journalist John Seabrook, current American culture has entered a "*nobrow* condition" replacing the old hierarchy of highbrow/lowbrow culture (John Seabrook 2000). It occurred as a "teutonic shift in the uses of culture-as-status in America, from the old town-house world of High-culture to the megastore of Nobrow" (Seabrook 2000, 26). Previously, the elite distinguished themselves from consumers of commercial culture, or mass culture, and the highbrow/lowbrow distinction was "the language by which culture was translated into status" (ibid). However, in the last decades of the 20th Century, "the old distinction between the elite culture of the aristocrats and the commercial culture of the masses was torn down and in its place was erected

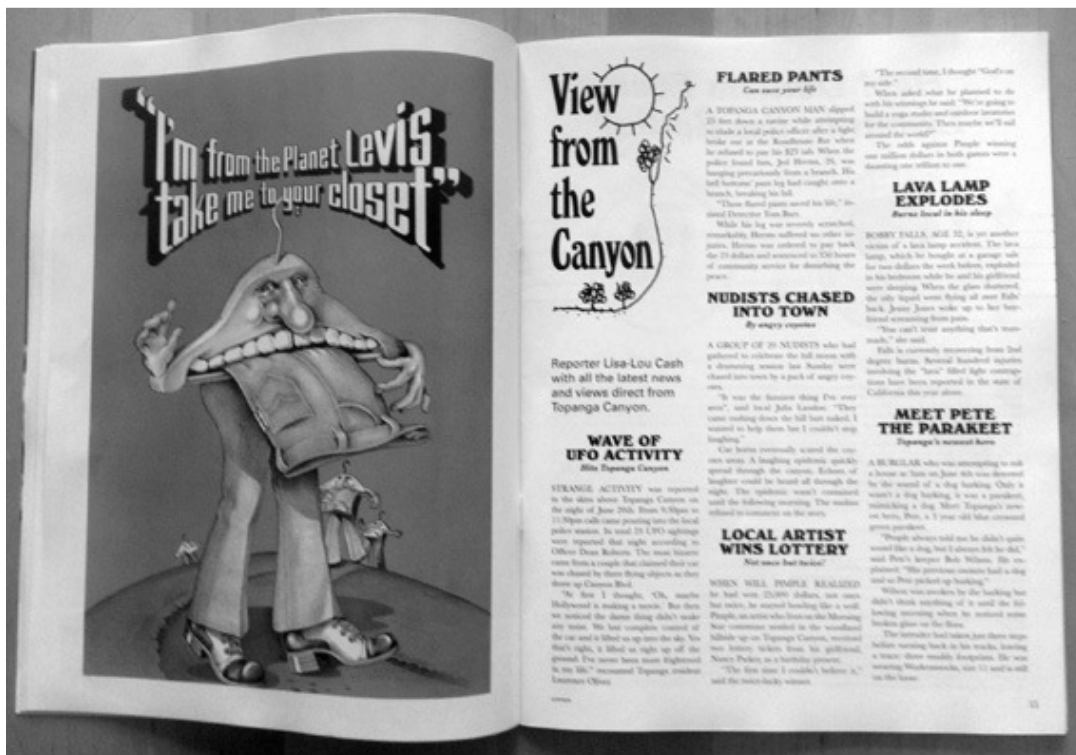
a hierarchy of hotness” (Seabrook 2000, 28). It is worth noting that the drawing of distinctions does not end, but that distinctions and status can now be based on popular culture in a no-brow “buzz,” where culture and marketing converge. Retro, for instance, may be seen as a performance of distinction based on popular or no-brow culture, where objects such as vintage erotic magazines or action figures becomes markers of “taste” and value.

These developments in the understanding of popular culture are important for the formation of retro and its study. As was the case with subculture, however, the distinct notion of popular culture in contemporary culture is challenged by developments in contemporary culture – expressed in a phenomenon such as retro – where a normative use of the concept of popular culture is not very productive. Still, popular culture forms a strand in the general reception of retro. When retro is conceived as popular culture, it is seen as having a *mainstream* character connected to passive consumption, contrary to having subversive subcultural status. Example are found in Kurt Anderson’s article “You Say You Want a Devolution” in *Vanity Fair* (2012) about nostalgia and revivals in the American popular culture, or in Simon Reynolds’ *Retromania* (2011), which can be read as a description of retro’s move from a field of subculture to one of popular culture, resulting in a loss of its progressive agency. As such, popular culture is a field that has a certain logic of practices attached to it. Just as it responds to the history of subculture, retro refers extensively to the history of popular culture and the character of the popular as something that involves objects and practices. Retro invests objects and phenomena of popular culture with connoisseurship and notions of authenticity and aesthetic value, in spite of previous views of popular culture as being incompatible with such values.

Retro culture, then, goes beyond any simple identification of it as subculture or popular culture, and I will suggest that retro may be understood as having a reflexive relationship to both of these categories by knowingly referring to its status as subculture and popular culture. Retro often consciously blends together the two categories and their associated signifiers. For example, the iconic clothing company Levi Strauss and Co. issued a paraphrase of a 1972 underground rock magazine as an advertisement in 2013 (see illustrations on the next page). The 60-page magazine called *Zipper* contained features on fictive rock bands, fictive record reviews, columns on hippie lifestyle, classified ads and vintage Levi’s ads, all in the rhetorical and visual style of counter cultural magazines like *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*, with neither explanation nor reference to the present.



Ill. 5: Zipper – a Levi's advertisement formed as a fictive underground magazine, Levi's 2013.



Ill. 6: Opening from Zipper magazine with "fake" retro ad and countercultural news, Levi's 2013.

This profound retro gesture obviously entangles the properties of subculture and popular culture. It is of course an advertisement, supposedly trying to create a brand image of Levi's jeans, inscribing a counter cultural heritage into a corporate identity. However, even as such it does seem to refer to a complex relation between counter culture and corporate culture in the 1960s and 1970s. As Thomas Frank has described in *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), there were more similarities than normally assumed between the new business culture and the counter culture of the 1960s, since they were both aiming at the young, cool and non-conforming. Thus, "the revolution against conformity was most definitely not a revolt against consumerism or the institution of advertising [...] The counterculture was, ultimately, just a branch of the same revolution that had swept the critical-creative style to prominence and that many believed was demolishing Theory X hierarchy everywhere, from Vietnam to the boardroom" (Frank 1997, 118). With Zipper Magazine, the revolution against conformity – in counter culture as well as in commercial popular culture – has become heritage and tradition. In his study of retro branding and corporate identity, Stephen Brown (2001) has claimed that retro branding has a power to harmonize the conflicts and contradictions of modern life. Rather than being an expression of passive nostalgia (as the description in Chapter 1 suggests, nostalgia is rarely passive), retro is energized by, and aware of, the tensions in modern culture, such as those between the popular "mainstream" culture and the "underground" culture.

### **Contemporary culture, identity and things**

To elaborate the cultural status of retro, I will move to a more general perspective of cultural theory and critical thinking. On this basis, I will discuss contemporary identities through the notion of lifestyle, and their background in certain fundamental developments in the culture of late modernity, such as the informalization of the post-traditional society and the aestheticization of everyday life. To comment on the complex status of *things* in contemporary culture, I will refer to Scott Lash's and Celia Lury's thinking about the "global culture industry" and its cultural objects, and discuss its relevance in relation to retro culture.

The weakening of concepts of modern culture like subculture and popular culture discussed above can be seen as interconnected with some broader tendencies in contemporary culture, according to several observers. For example, David Chaney sees subculture as a superfluous concept in the context of contemporary culture, "because the type of investment that the

notion of subculture is based upon is becoming more general, and therefore the varieties of modes of symbolization and involvement are more common in everyday life” (Chaney 2002, 37).

According to Chaney, cultural activities and concerns have become more self-evidently important in most people’s everyday lives, reaching far beyond the traditional cultural institutions, as culture has become a major part of the private as well as national economy. Simultaneously, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterized by an ‘opening-up’ of the distinctions between high and low culture, resulting, for instance, in an *informalization*, as “[... ] the conventions of polite behavior in public cultural settings are gradually discarded in favor of broader, less socially-differentiated forms of dress, speech, customs around eating and other modes of public behavior” (Chaney, 40).

Furthermore, multiculturalization through immigration and a globalized economy and culture “has bred forms of cultural melding and mediation such as transculturalization, indigenization and glocalization” (ibid.), creating a culture of hybridity – a condition described by Homi K. Bhabha as the “hybridization” of culture (Bhabha 1994).

This results in a shift from *ways of life* to *lifestyles* as the “frameworks on which notions of community, affiliation and difference are negotiated” (Chaney 2002, 41). *Ways of life* are “the local customs, traditions, attitudes and values that have given an environment both its distinct character and a weight of expectation to which individuals necessarily adapt” (ibid.). Here the social order is constituted through an entire environment, where *things* have specific functions and meanings. In the culture of late modernity, this structuring of life is broken up, for example through the culture of consumerism, and the meanings of *things* becomes more fluid. Thus Chaney introduces the concept of *lifestyles*, understood as sites and strategies for affiliation and identification – as a result of culture having become “more clearly a resource than an inheritance”: “[T]hus, what were once described as subcultures could now be regarded as collective lifestyle statements, which reflexively negotiate rather than directly mirror the structural experience of social class” (Chaney 2002, 42). According to Chaney, lifestyles are cultural identities that are more flexible as well as rootless: “Lifestyles are a set of practices and attitudes that make sense in specific contexts [...] a way of using certain goods, places and times that is characteristic of a group but not the totality of their social experience” (Chaney 1996, 5). A consequence of this condition of fluid cultural meaning is an undermining of any permanent intellectual authority to control or legislate cultural value. The authority of expertise is constantly renewed and contested by different audiences and contexts. As a corollary of this, identity is based and judged on cultural tastes and

choices, and “the investment of personal meaning and desire for control over the organization of material culture will lead to what has been called an ‘aestheticization of everyday life’” (ibid.) The *lifestyle* term is able to account for retro’s flexible relation to identity characterized by variation according to context and the freedom of choice in a post-traditional culture. The weakness of the term, however, is its expansiveness, enabling everything from an individual’s choice of breakfast to his political behavior to be included under it. It might also give the impression of presupposing a *freedom of choice*-situation that trumps any socio-cultural or material context. Again, we see that a lot of issues are involved here, and as my cases will show, expressions of retro culture should be seen not only as articulations of individuality, but also as indications of systems of specific sociocultural circumstance.

The aestheticization of everyday life is described by sociologist Mike Featherstone as a principle characteristic of “*postmodernité*”: the cultural experience and mode of signification in postmodern society (Featherstone 2007, 64). Here, one view of the aestheticization of everyday life is expressed in the theories of the simulacra and simulation by Jean Baudrillard, (1983) where reality is transformed into images and thus into aesthetic experience. Postmodernism’s “anything goes” and breaking with former hierarchies and distinctions (such as high modernism’s pure media) reduces any object to aesthetic use, but the concept also refers to contemporary culture’s commercialization of every aspect of the everyday. Featherstone traces three origins of this aestheticization. One is the historical avant-gardes of the early 20th century, which in their works sought to efface the boundaries between art and everyday life. Following neo-avant-gardes has continued this, for instance with pop art’s focus on the modern consumer society’s thing-world. Featherstone’s second origin is the aestheticism of artists and intellectuals in the 1800’s, who envisioned a project of turning their lives into works of art, such as the *flâneur* of Charles Baudelaire and the *l’art pour l’art* thinking of Oscar Wilde. Thirdly, the aestheticization of everyday life refers to “the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society” (Featherstone 2007, 66). On a more specific level, the aestheticization of everyday life is recognized in the growing significance of aesthetic perception in even the most mundane forms of consumption, making product design and styling a ubiquitous element of every aspect of life. “We want our vacuum cleaners and mobile phones to sparkle, our bathroom faucets and desk accessories to express our personalities,” as Virginia Postrel writes (Postrel 2004, 3) about the increasing importance of product design and styling in every aspect of life, expanding the

domain of the aesthetic so that today, “aesthetics has become too important to be left to the aesthetes” (Postrel 2004, 4).

This general aestheticization is also one of the topics discussed by Scott Lash and Celia Lurie in *Global Culture Industry* (2007). Lash and Lurie see a *global culture industry* as having succeeded the culture industry described by modern critics like Adorno and Horkheimer. In the days of the culture industry in the industrial society of the mid-20th Century, culture as domination as well as resistance was a superstructure and cultural entities were the exception: the material objects of everyday life belonged to the infrastructure, and a delimited amount of objects and phenomena were considered “culture.” But now with the global culture industry, cultural objects “are everywhere: as information, as communications, as branded products, as financial services, as media products, as transport and leisure services” (Lash and Lurie 2007, 4). Through all these forms, aestheticization has become ubiquitous, dominating both the economy and everyday life. Culture is no longer representational but *thingified* and happens as mediations of *things*.

In this a double movement is felt: the formerly intellectual and immaterial meaning of “culture” becomes embedded in entities and things, as things also become media. It is not primarily things that are traded in the global culture, but symbols and brands, from the concept of Young British Art to sportswear. Lash and Lurie illustrate this in their “object biographies” of phenomena of the global culture industry such as the Nike brand, the European football championship Euro '96, Swatch watches and the Wallace and Gromit animation characters. In all of these, value and identity are formed by the virtual brand rather than by the actual properties of the objects, according to Lash and Lurie. This aestheticized status of cultural objects is embedded in the *social imaginary*: “the ‘middle region’ of our sense-making apparatus. We make sense of the world through intuition and perception, our ‘lower’ faculties, and through the ‘higher’ faculties of rational understanding. Between these two levels - and forming sometimes harmonious, sometimes contradictory connections between them - is the imagination or the imaginary” (Lash and Lurie 2007, 182). While Lash and Lurie analyze the more centralized cultural objects of multinational corporations, the dominance of symbolic value and the processes of *thingification of media* - where we do not ‘read them’ as much as we ‘do them’” (Lash and Lurie 2007, 8) - and the *medification of things* (the aestheticized symbol value), are relevant for understanding retro, in the context of newly emerged commercial and cultural spheres. By definition, retro entails cultural objects laden with aesthetic and symbol value rather than representational *meaning*. Retro objects are often even the functional



objects of infrastructure from past days of the culture industry, such as the kitchenware or affordable furniture of the 1950s, now returned an aestheticized status as cultural objects. Retro, however, may also be seen as a response to, or even a counter culture in relation to the mechanisms of the global culture industry. Retro often puts brand status in an ironic light, and is by its practitioners understood as an alternative to “first-cycle consumption.” The business structure of most of the ‘retro industry’ is still rather small-scale and unorganized. It is debatable if retro and its obsession with materiality constitutes a thingification of media and or mediafication of things. Often retro insists on the specificity of objects, which cannot be turned into anything else. And as Christian Thorne claims in his essay “The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded,” retro at least contains a wish to take objects out of commercial circulation so that they are handed down to us “not for our consumption but for our care” (Thorne 2003, 114). As in many other senses, the status of retro objects is paradoxical and ambivalent. They are commercial *and* anti-commercial, superficial *and* deep, in the center and mainstream as much as the periphery and underground of contemporary culture and its global culture industry.

### **Individuality and collectivity in contemporary culture**

In this cultural perspective, individuality and collectivity are factors that are heavily debated and contested. As indicated, the general view on cultural practice in youth and leisure culture has shifted from the collective based focus of the classic Birmingham School-version of subculture, or the critique of passive mass consumption of Adorno and other early studies of popular culture, to a more individualistic focus in later accounts, echoing general characteristics of postmodernity as a “dissolution of collective identity” (Lash and Urry 1994).

In the essay “Tourists and Travellers? ‘Subcultures,’ Reflexive Identities and Neo-Tribal Society” in the aforementioned anthology *After Subculture*, sociologist Paul Sweetman describes two “distinct strands of contemporary social theory” with theories focusing on increasing individuality on the one side, and accounts recognizing a new collectivity on the other. A theory of individuality is the “reflexive identity” expressed in the theories of Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck among others, according to which identity has become increasingly reflexive and is now actively constructed through privatized patterns of, for example, consumption. Earlier, in the pre-modern, tradition-based society, identity was relatively given and stable through family status and occupation, and even in the ‘simple’ or ‘organized’ modernity, identity was ‘firmly stable’ - for instance when “[...] you were German and a white-collar employee, or English and a worker” (also

described in the aforementioned ‘cultural stratifications’). In “late, high or reflexive modernity, however, identity is increasingly ambiguous, and has to be worked at individually in the context of more-or-less freely chosen possibilities” (Sweetman 2002: 81).

Identity in Western culture has undergone a ‘decline of traditional ties’ or a ‘de-traditionalization,’ which, according to Scott Lash, means that “the monitoring by the other of traditional conventions” has been “replaced by the necessary self-monitoring or reflexivity of late modernity (Lash, 1993, Sweetman 2004, 81). Thus, individuals must choose from a range of possibilities on offer as identity has increasingly become a matter of choice. Self-identity has become “a reflexively organized endeavour,” according to Giddens, and “individuals must now produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves” according to Beck (Ibid.). This condition of reflexive modernity seems to be on par with postmodernism and its manifest relativism, be it celebrating or simply acknowledging this new individuality. It could be argued, however, that postmodernism generally points towards a creative play and focus on the surface, and is typically announced in relation to the arts, while reflexive modernity has a more duty-bound focus on identity and how it is grounded in new, floating circumstances, for example in lifestyles studied by sociology.

A seemingly quite different result of late modernity is the theory of neo-tribes and emergent socialities emphasizing a new collectivity. In works such as *The Time of the Tribes* (1996) Michel Maffesoli has described a “resurgence of the basic forms of community, a move away from the rational, contractual relationships towards empathetic forms of *sociality*, where what is important is not some abstract, idealized goal, but rather the feeling of togetherness engendered by one’s direct involvement with the group.” In contrast to modernity’s “proliferation of associational forms of relationships,” postmodernity has tended to favor “a withdrawal into the group as well as a deepening of relationships within these groups” (Maffesoli 1996, Sweetman 2004: 85). It could be argued that these relationships are based on aesthetic and cultural practices and objects. This would be the case with subcultures, where individuals are gathered around clothing, entertainment and cultural objects rather than a shared social or cultural identity. For example, employees of a certain company would be participating in “tribes” as cross-fit athletes, rockabilly revivalists or foodies, rather than playing in the company’s brass band, attending the church they were born into, or, being collectively politically organized.

It is relevant to understand these two “strands” as a sociological frame for retro. Retro concerns individual as well as collective identity and has an ambivalent status, being both part of

cultural trends and in reaction to them. People explain their use of retro style and objects as a way to express individual identity and to participate in a community, (as expressed in the portrayal of the Swedish rockabilly culture in Ekman, 2007). Accordingly, the practice of retro culture may include the individual level of styling and home design, as well as the collective experience of events such as concerts and markets, and of course reflect the general level of the cultural distribution. To elaborate on this, I will move into a more precise description of the retro object and its cultural context and circulation.

## **The retro object and its social context**

### **Scenes**

The term *scene* provides a useful approach for describing social formations of retro in a more concrete form. Like *retro*, *scene* is often used in practice but seldom defined. In its daily use, “scene” may refer to something very local, like what is happening around a specific bar, or it may refer to a global phenomenon like “the heavy metal scene.” As the Canadian media and culture scholar Will Straw has described, “Scenes may be distinguished according to their location (as in Montreal’s St. Laurent scene), the genre of cultural production which gives them coherence (a musical style, for example, as in references to the electroclash scene) or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape (as with urban outdoor chess-playing scenes)” (Straw 2005, 412). As such, the “relationship to territory is not easily asserted” and the connection to a scene might be physical as well as virtual. It may take the form of everything from “face to face sociability” to “globalized virtual communities of taste,” and it can “evoke both the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life” (Straw 2002, 248). In general, scenes can be defined as “particular clusters of social and cultural activity” (Straw 2005, 412). Scenes are usually thought of as flexible and anti-essentializing. As such, the notion of the scene in the field of popular music will “disengage phenomena from the more fixed and theoretically troubled unities of class or subculture” (Straw 2002, 248). Being part of the “punk scene” (locally or globally) today does not have the same implications as being viewed by a member of a subculture in the Birmingham School, which would mean expressing a specific socio-cultural identity. As concluded in the previous discussions and throughout this study, retro has many different degrees of affiliation

and investment, for instance spanning from fashion accessories to constituent parts of identity. The flexible affiliation of the *scene* may apply well to this.

Considering the different forms and the flexibility of the term, *scene* implies a social formation around a cultural activity as well as a context. This context may be provided by geography, in which case the context is physical and concrete; or by media, in which case it has a virtual character. Scenes are often embedded in the urban geography and the mode of a city's cultural life, spanning from fine arts to nightlife. As such, they are "elusive, hugely attractive, accessible only to those who have qualifications to find it and describe it" (Allan Blum in Simon 2006, 34). Scenes come and go, and they are "volatile and ephemeral" and "strongly imbricated with urban life" (ibid.). Scenes may also vary in scale, and be understood as belonging to a bigger system.

With these properties the concept of scenes are useful for describing the socio-cultural context for retro. Obviously, retro does not mean one particular scene identified by its name (like the hip-hop scene or the postcard collector scene). Rather, it is found in "particular clusters of social and cultural activity," like special clannish forums or in changeable locations. As my case studies will show, retro is embedded in a local geography, in concrete as well as in more symbolic ways. As Straw says, the notion of scene does not imply a fixed unity or total commitment to subculture. Additionally, the scene is most often directed towards cultural practices like art and entertainment, rather than all the other domains of life that the notion of lifestyle potentially includes. For this reason, studying the commitment to a scene becomes more manageable than studying of lifestyle, which may include habits of eating, working, voting, etc. Furthermore, lifestyle implies a free chosen form of identity. Scenes depend on certain specific conditions, such as those of geography. The *scene* also expresses an exclusivity and limited availability of participation. It might demand qualifications just to identify the scenes and even more to be identified with them. It should also be stated that scenes involve a lot of *things* and a lot of doing with these *things*. The rockabilly revival scene in Montreal (described in Chapter 5), for instance, involves live music, record collecting, a special clothing practice – which involves purchasing both clothes from second-hand shops as well as newly-produced clothes aimed at the scene – body practices like make-up and tattoos, burlesque dancing, the maintaining and use of vintage cars and many other things, practices, and, of course, bodies.

In this way, the *scene* term covers the exchange between the local/specific and the general/global. A cultural form like jazz, which was originally spread internationally from the US,

is practiced on local scenes, engaging with local contexts. The interpretation and distribution of a general form coming from the outside will happen in some kind of combination with local circumstances and things. As my analyses will stress, such an exchange between the global and the local is what happens in the practice of retro in its specific contexts.

### **Orvar Löfgren's modern materiality**

To explain this exchange, I will present the understanding of the material culture of Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren. Like Olsen (2010), Löfgren has criticized poststructuralist ethnography and cultural studies for ignoring the presence of materiality and what people really do with *things* in modern culture. Among the important, but overlooked, aspects of the modern thingishness are the “national framing of routines,” the “materiality of the nation state,” and the “nationalization of trivialities” (Löfgren 1997, 106). These omnipresent small factors “produce a feeling of being at home, or the alienation of being abroad” (ibid.), even in a globalized culture. Even when crossing the undramatic border between similar countries like Norway and Sweden, a difference is felt in detail between the colors of houses, styling of gardens, road signs, and the selection of goods on the shelves of the same chain of petrol stations. These are the small details of national style and traditions of taste that create a feeling of home and of ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Löfgren 1993, 86-87). These small things create a “cultural thickening [...] of belonging” that is felt, not due to ingenious traditions, but in variations in the globally distributed culture. It is the mass-produced objects of modernity that create our everyday feeling of cultural identity and difference.

This is not a static condition, but one that develops through the distribution, import and translation of *things*. As a result, “nationalization and internationalization are not polarized developments but parallel and interdependent ones. During the decades after the Second World War, Swedish life in some respects became both more international and more Swedish.” (Löfgren 1997, 109) These changing configurations of material culture and its continuous production of meaning and sense of belonging are an important aspect of modern *things*, which are reflected in retro culture in its exchange between the general and the specific. An object like a 1960s Marimekko fabric is seen as both Finnish and internationally modern, and hip Montreal garage rock bands are increasingly eager to acknowledge the local heritage of ‘60s Yé-yé. As I will explain in relation to the case studies, retro objects are given meanings corresponding with locally specific ideas of *Fiftiesness* or *Americanness*. The specific variations in the distribution of the mass-produced modern objects should not only be understood in the context of the nation, but also of the

region or other geographical and cultural entities. There will be a different constellation of objects in one city compared to another, and there will be different scenes of, for example, retro culture. Löfgren's studies of everyday material culture – for instance in relation to tourism, home design and the idea of Swedish Modern - show how the “mass-produced and anonymous are transformed into the unique,” which “slides into becoming a building element in the user's world of memories, symbols and associations” (Löfgren 1993 II, 163<sup>31</sup>) when the mass-produced is individualized. When a commodity, such as a candlestick, a sofa cushion, or a poster of a popular painting is moved from shelves in the shop to a home, in a certain way it becomes individualized and personalized. Of course, this personal appropriation happens inside cultural frames that, according to Löfgren, vary - not just between gender, class and generation, but also between nationality (and regionality). Among these are the culturally programmed norms of the aesthetic: the experience of the beautiful, the good, the harmonic and the truthful (ibid.). This “national aesthetic” would be different in New Orleans and Stockholm, as it is felt, for instance, in the Christmas decorations that Löfgren describes from these places. Again, the national aesthetic is not only found in artisanal pre-modern crafts, but also in modern objects and in the distribution of imported and translated things.

These insights are important contributions to the social perspective on *things* for my study, particularly framing the status of the modern things and their use. Throughout my cases I will show how retro is a negotiation between what is local and site-specific and what is international and more generally based. This applies to contemporary practices of retro, which take place in local scenes as well as in international circulations, and to the recent past, which is revived when very specific and often locally based phenomena are combined with general notions of, for example, Fiftiesness. Retro is a performance of the cultural thickening of belonging in modern, material culture, questioning as well as affirming cultural identity, as my case studies will show.

### **The retro object: selection and circulation**

Being used on an individual as well as collective basis, and expressing the locally specific as well as the globally general, the retro object is quite a prism, casting light in many directions, depending on the angle from which it is observed. In its social circulation, retro is characterized by *inclusion*, due to its popularity, uniting many kinds of objects, signs and practices in a specific aesthetic category, one characterized by *selection*, in a symbolic as well as a literal sense. In this way, retro implies

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<sup>31</sup> ”Det mass-producerade och anonyma förvandlas til det unika – det glider inn som ett byggelement i brukarens värld av minnen, symboler och associationer.” (Translation from Swedish to English by K. Handberg).

processes of selection and disposal. One study estimates that only 10 percent of the clothes delivered to a flea market are actually sold and reused (Palmsköld 2013, 20) - and since retro is one of the most selective second-hand cultures, the selection rate there might be even lower. As I suggested earlier in relation to Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, retro is a cultural nomination of things that moves them from a marginal position into one of valuation. The sociologist Kevin Hetherington has discussed the meaning of disposal in modern culture and describes it with the image of a door: "Not only do doors allow traffic in both directions when open, but they can be closed to keep things outside/inside, present/absent, at least temporarily and provisionally" (Hetherington 2004, 164). This door metaphor is relevant in connection to retro in several ways: Things may go in and out of the door as retro, and the room of retro may be experienced as open or closed. The objects of retro have been thrown out of the door once, even if this disposal was not definitive. Now they are let in again, not forever, but due to a temporary interest in them. As Thompson observed, an important basis for this is the different material and economic life cycles of objects; they are often materially present after their immediate value has receded. In other words, retro implies a more complex status of the outmoded, rather than a definitive disposal.

Somewhat paradoxically, in relation to the clear images that retro produces of, for example, *Fiftiesness*, with its perfect catalogue of period pieces, the world always contains objects from many time periods and of many temporalities. According to anthropologist Tim Ingold's description of the landscape, it is always a network of different and interrelated times and rhythms (Ingold 1993). He illustrates this by describing a landscape painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder with its different farming activities, its old trees and the crops on the fields, the old church, and people of different ages. Thus, there is not just one temporality in the landscape but a whole network of different ones. This point may be developed further into the temporality of our modern everyday surroundings. In a discussion of the way in which the general environment of a historical period like the Iron Age is often characterized by a coherent totality, ie. as a "completely Iron Age-like environment," archaeologist Laurent Olivier (writing in 1999) has noted the "invisibility" of one's own time, his being the 1990s. Outside his window he sees houses from previous centuries, while the late twentieth century is only visible in small details. Thus, he realizes that "the present is not comprised of things belonging to the same age but takes the form of a multitemporal field in which the past has accumulated itself" (Olivier 2001, here from Olsen 2010, 108). Thus, a present is not so much made of its entirely new things, but rather it "consists of a palimpsest of all durations of the past that have been recorded in matter" (Ibid.). This is very much related to the perspective of

cultural memory concerning the ways the past is made present and how the creation of a common past is a fundamental feature in any culture, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In the mapping and analysis of the circulation of things in social contexts, my study of retro must necessarily be selective and leave out aspects. Since it concerns retro as a form of contemporary aesthetics, it will admittedly focus on the more spectacular sides of object culture rather than on the more ordinary consumption and use of objects, or, in Daniel Miller's term, the "humility" of objects. I will not be able to uncover the entire economical dimension of retro in either the established or more un-established forms of the retro business, or the full social-anthropological reading of retro in society. Having developed the object-culture perspective in this chapter, however, and with the characteristics of the experience of the modern object and its circulation described as a background, I will analyze retro in its social contexts and follow its circulation of objects in them.

## **Conclusion: The social life of modern things**

To sum up, retro always involves *things* and an awareness of their qualities. In this way, retro could be called a "meta-thingness" that is actively involved in a debate on the meaning and essence of the things. When a souvenir plastic ashtray is staged as a design object, and in this way obviously elevated to a 'durable,' what is being highlighted is the material thingness of the mass-produced object, its social status, its aesthetic properties, and its use and biography. It should also be noted that retro emerges and spreads at the very same time as the theoretical studies of material culture described above. One could go as far as to see retro as a manifest expression of "the material turn" and "the cultural turn." As indicated in this chapter, and as I will elaborate further below, the growing obsession in academia as well as in contemporary culture about the qualities of things themselves reflects a theoretical turning towards materiality rather than rhetoric and representation. This underscores the need to think beyond the association of postmodernism and its immaterial relativism and simulacra when analyzing contemporary retro culture.

It is important to state that retro should be thought of as thing-based in a dynamic and processual sense. Retro happens with things and involves how they are done and lived with. This is expressed in the *materializations* described by Damsholt, Simonsen and Mordhorst, where the material is understood as processual, relational and performative. This is in harmony with the study



of the modern objects in their social context, as described in general by Appadurai and Kopytoff, and in more specific detail by Löfgren.

The social context of materialization should be thought of as related to specific notions of culture, following Bourdieu's theories of fields with their specific logics and rules. In this way the concepts of subculture and popular culture are taken into account and their qualities and limitations debated. I will argue that contemporary retro culture has a reflexive 'post' status towards these concepts of culture, knowingly referring to the characteristics of the subcultures and the conventional popular culture, but also to the ambivalences and conflicts surrounding them.

To understand retro in a social context today, discussions of individuality and collectivity must be carried out. It should be stated that these obviously complex and general discussions exceed the scope of this study and contain the risk of reproducing the very same generalizations and deterministic assumptions that it is my aim to modify. To do this I have introduced the concept of the "scene" and Löfgren's notions of the specificities created through the regional production, distribution and translation of modern culture. This theme is further discussed in the next chapter, which deals with cultural memory.

## Chapter 3:

# Cultural Memory: Pastness, temporality, and cultural identity

### Introduction: Retro as cultural memory

In this chapter, I will review cultural memory as an adequate mode of viewing retro, since it is a cultural practice concerning how the past is remembered and used in the present. This is a central point of this dissertation and a key to understanding retro: retro stages a contemporary identity and its milieu through all kinds of elements and references to the recent past, the material as well as the immaterial, and it uses the past in an aesthetic and emotional manner not usually associated with the historical when understood as the intellectual analysis of “when” and “why.” The relationship between retro and the past that it revives is one of overt selection, *presence* rather than *meaning*, and the ability to establish some kind of personal connection with the favored past. These features are recognized as the characteristics of cultural memory: the way memory and memorialization form a basis for culture.

Directed towards the recent past, retro concerns itself with a time that is in touch with the living memory of its practitioners. Furthermore, the objects of retro culture usually originate in the everyday sphere of popular culture, interior design and fashion, which are areas that are often casually remembered rather than officially historicized. Accordingly, the material of retro is accessed through memory rather than through historical study, and, as argued in the following chapters, retro often pioneers the historical mapping of modern culture.

In its specific representation of the past (such as in the distinctive *Fiftiesness* as a recognizable image of the 1950s), retro presupposes a shared conception of history and a common vision of the past. In this way, retro is engaged in the process of *creating a shared past* (Assmann 1992). This process evolves in a negotiation between the individual and the collective memory and involves a range of media and cultural forms.

From the beginning it should be emphasized that retro’s relationship with memory is complex and even equivocal. It is seldom based on *literal* memory, as when reviving the clothes and music of one’s own youth or marking the celebration of, say, the 1980s. Instead, retro has the character of an *appropriated* memory like when it takes the clothes and cultural references of

another year or generation, and uses them casually and knowingly. This appropriation may span various chronological, geographical, or cultural distances, for instance, like when locally distributed 1980s phenomena are used as retro, compared to when a more distant cultural universe such as the 1950s Southern rockabilly became the object of a retro subculture in Copenhagen in 2014. The interaction of nostalgia and irony that is always present in retro, as described in the first chapter, of course also results in a complex and sometimes conflicting relationship with memory. Retro contains impulses to remember loyally as well as to deliberately deconstruct any coherent idea of the past and how to remember it. For example, compare the Swedish rockabilly fanatic, who furnishes his home with nothing made after 1959 out of loyal admiration for the period (Ekman 2007), with the kitsch use of flying ducks on the wall among young hipsters in London (Baker 2013). Furthermore, retro's ambiguous cultural status - commercialized and adapted by mainstream culture as well as associated with the underground and practiced by groups as an alternative to mainstream culture - makes it complex. Retro is part of the "mass-marketing of nostalgia" (Jameson) but also works as a *vernacular memory* for specific groups and interests. This also concerns retro's position in the "memory boom" and the intensive use of the past in the event culture and its economy.

These issues make it relevant to discuss cultural memory as a theoretical perspective for analyzing retro. In addition, the current significance of memory and history in culture is significant as a context for the practice of retro. The analysis of retro can even contribute to the field of cultural memory studies as based on material and visual culture rather than literary material and, even more importantly, by providing a way a look at the past that is not dominated by trauma and violation. My studies analyze retro as a focused effort to memorialize the Western post-WW2 era, and cultural memory forms an obvious backdrop to this.

## **Cultural Memory Studies**

Memory in a collective and cultural sense has currently become a much-coveted term. Its popularity is rising both in an academic field of interdisciplinary research and in the cultural and political realities where memory has emerged as a somewhat surprising key concern (Huyssen 2003, 11). In academia, cultural memory studies is "a key issue of interdisciplinary research, involving fields as diverse as history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, and

the neurosciences,” bringing together “the humanities, social studies and the natural sciences” (Erll 2008, 3) in an increasingly established area with an intensive activity of events and publications (such as Memory Studies (Sage Publishing 2008-present)), textbooks (such as *The Collective Memory Reader* (2011), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008), and even a series of books in the Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies currently counting 24 titles<sup>32</sup>). At the same time as this new academic interest in memory has been spreading since the 1990s, there has been a general recognition of a “memory boom” (Huyssen, Winter) in Western or even global culture, spanning from prestigious museums and official commemorations to historical themes being the popular culture’s favorite topics. Cultural memory thus equally refers to a condition in contemporary culture and to a way of studying it.

In this chapter I will describe both these meanings – Cultural Memory Studies and the Memory Boom – in contemporary culture as an important background for understanding retro. I will start with cultural memory studies, introducing the field and three of its main ideas: the *collective memory* of Maurice Halbwachs, the *cultural memory* of Jan and Aleida Assmann and the *lieux de mémoire* of Pierre Nora, in order to discuss the current field of memory studies.

According to German literature- and media scholar Astrid Erll, the term cultural memory “accentuates the connection of memory on the one hand and socio-cultural contexts on the other” (Erll 2008a, 4) and can thus in its most general sense be defined as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (Erll 2008b, 2), or, “an umbrella term for all those processes of a biological, medical and social nature which relate past and present (and future) in sociocultural contexts” (Erll 2011, 7). This includes the visible and manifestly collective ways of remembering, as well as more hidden or latent forms of collective memory. It also includes different understandings of culture as formed by the social (made up of people, social relations and institutions), the material (artifacts and media) and the mental (culturally defined ways of thinking, mentalities) (Erll 2008a, 4). The different understandings and influences of cultural memory are also expressed in the terminology unfolding and competing in the field with concepts such as *mémoire collective*/collective memory, *cadres sociale*/social frameworks of memory, social memory, *mnemosyne*, *ars memoriae*, *loci et imagines*, *lieux de memoire*/sites of memory, invented traditions, myth, *memoria*, heritage, commemoration, *kulturelles Gedächtnis*, communicative memory, generationality, postmemory (Erll 2008b, 2-3). These terms express the field’s roots in

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<sup>32</sup> <http://us.macmillan.com/series/PalgraveMacmillanMemoryStudies> (accessed April 2014).

different disciplines, schools and language traditions, and generally, cultural memory studies are not tied to a fixed position or to one theory. It will not be possible here to reflect on the many variants of and disciplinary approaches to memory studies, such as the studies of memory in psychology and neuroscience. The possibilities of the field can, however, be described by assessing three of the key figures in the development of cultural memory studies.

### **Halbwachs and the social frameworks of memory**

Cultural memory studies have many inspirations, past and present, and several forefathers and possible allies have been proclaimed. As indicated, cultural memory studies emerged in the 1990s, as the term “cultural memory” was coined by German Egyptologist Jan Assmann in *Das Kulturelle Gedächtniss* (1992). The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is usually credited as the first interlocutor to understand memory on a cultural, collective scale. In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (“The Social Frameworks of Memory,” 1925, partly issued as *On Collective Memory* in 1992), and in later writings, such as *La Topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: étude de mémoire collective* (“The Legendary Topography of the Holy Land”) (1941) and the posthumously published *La mémoire collective* (1950), Halbwachs describes a collective memory (*mémoire collective*) as an important feature of social life. Any group defines itself through the idea of a shared past, and our memories are formed through all the social groups that we participate in – for instance through family, school, work, social life, political, religious or cultural circles and affiliations (Halbwachs 2011, 146). Thus, the identity of a group is created by a collectivity of memories. But the individual’s remembrance of the past is also formed through his/her social contexts and group membership (social frameworks) to the degree that the idea of an individual memory is questioned by Halbwachs. As Halbwachs claims, “often we deem ourselves originators of thoughts and ideas, feelings and passions, actually inspired by some groups,” and “present deeply held convictions” borrowed from an outside source (Halbwachs 2011, 139-140). These social influences usually go unperceived because they have become internalized and thus invisible.

The collective memory has a two-fold formative status defining the group as well as the individual. “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs 1992, 40). Group and individual are then interdependent, but at the same time they are parts of a larger, complex system, since the individual is a member of many social groups, visible as invisible, and these groups “change and segment continually” (ibid.). With

this constructivist approach to memory, Halbwachs' theories – and, not least, the concept of *collective memory* itself – have been adopted by a series of researchers since the first English translation of Halbwachs' works appeared in 1980 with a translation of the posthumous *La mémoire collective*. It has, for instance, been applied to The Cultural Turn (described in Chapter 2) with its focus on representations and cultural processes. His terms, however, have been accused of being too general, and the author has been criticized for not making a single, coherent theory about cultural memory (Erll 2011, 18). Thus Halbwachs' works are often cited as a source of inspiration, although they do not provide any strictly applicable theory.

Astrid Erll describes how Halbwachs' ideas of collective memory united two different concepts: 1. collective memory as the way in which individual, organic memory operates within the frameworks of sociocultural environments, and 2. collective memory as the creation of shared visions of the past, and how such perceptions are created in different kinds of groups – from small social groups to large cultural communities (Erll 2011, 15). In other words, there is a *collected* memory, which works on the individual, cognitive level, and there is a *collective* memory, which works on the collective social and cultural level (Erll 2011, 99). The meaning behind the use of the word memory can be characterized as “metonymy” in the first sense, where it is still describing an individual act processing in the brain, and as “metaphor” in the second sense, where memory is more of a linguistic image, expressed in such terms as “memory of culture,” “a society remembering,” or the “memory of literature” (Erll 2011, 97). Cultural memory studies often combine these different understandings, or, like Halbwachs, insist on some kind of interdependency. While the neurologic and psychological discussions of memory are not a part of this study, the importance of the social and cultural context for individual remembrance, and the formation of collective memories in social and cultural groups are both relevant topics for retro. Arguably, the interdependency between the collective and the individual is even a key feature of retro, which will be discussed later.

A central and contested feature of Halbwachs' theory is his understanding of memory as something that is different from history and historiography (or, different from the conventional understanding of what “history” meant in Halbwachs' time). Halbwachs contrasts history with memory in multiple ways: history is a record of changes and differences between past and present, whereas memory is based on an experience of continuity and resemblance with the past. Collective memory “retains from the past only what still lives or is still capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive” (Halbwachs 2011, 143). History “examines the groups

from the outside,” where the collective memory “is the group seen from within” (Halbwachs 2011, 147). Also, history focuses on longer durations, whereas collective memory has a shorter timespan, being the living memory of individuals and groups. In the end, every group “immobilizes time in its own way and imposes on its members the illusion that in a given duration of a constantly changing world, certain zones have acquired a relative stability and balance in which nothing essential is altered” (Halbwachs 2011, 149). The role of collective memory, then, is to defeat time and its changes. This is an interesting and continuously debatable argument in the discussion of retro and the group-based memory of the recent past.

### **The Cultural Memory of Jan Assmann**

As later commentators have observed, Halbwachs’ theories localize collective memory in immediate social groups and refer to everyday communication as the medium of collective memory. This has inspired more elaborate theories that attempt to further develop the social frameworks of memory and the creation of shared pasts. These theoretical advances were begun many years after Halbwachs’ death, at a time when he was largely forgotten, and where memory had not been the focus of much attention in a social and cultural sense. Today, in the wake of postmodernism and The Cultural Turn, this silence has been replaced by the aforementioned surge of interest in memory culture, memory studies, cultural identity and historicity.

The works of Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his wife, literary scholar Aleida Assmann, have been among the path-breaking efforts in cultural memory studies. Jan Assmann introduced his theory of the different concepts of communicative memory and cultural memory in *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992) (English edition: *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011)). In his studies of memory, identity and cultural continuity in the early civilizations in Egypt, Israel and Greece, Assmann advocated the importance of the “memory of a shared past” and the incorporation of “images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present” (Assmann 2011, 2). Assmann’s search for a concept to complement existing categories such as tradition, history and myth, in order to “encompass all such functional concepts as tradition forming, past reference, and political identity or imagination” (Assmann 2011, 9), resulted in the introduction of *cultural memory*. This was inspired by Halbwachs’ *collective memory* and the social frameworks of memory, but Assmann saw a need to expand the concept of group memory to a cultural scale. To distinguish between the everyday remembrance of the recent past and the ceremonial traditions of

cultural origin, Assmann introduced a three-leveled model of memory (Assmann 2011, 2008). The first level is an inner, neuro-mental *individual memory*. The second level is a *communicative memory*, which takes place within social groups and shapes the individual's everyday life. This is related to the recent past of the living memory, which does not reach further back than three generations and is circulated in the forms of everyday communication. This communicative memory is “non-institutional” and “not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission and interpretation” (Assmann 2008, 111). It is not “cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it lives in the everyday interaction and communication” (ibid.). This applies largely to Halbwachs' collective memory.

Assmann's third level is *cultural memory*. This reaches beyond the timespan of the individual's life and keeps alive the past, back to the origins of a culture. Cultural memory is mobilized at special occasions in ceremonial forms of communication (Assmann 2011, 38). It is formalized outside of everyday communication and happens through “fixed objectifications both linguistic and non-linguistic, such as rituals, dances, myths, patterns, dress, jewelry, tattoos, paintings, landscapes, and so on” (Assmann 2011, 37) – as “institutionalized mnemotechnics” (Ibid.). Cultural memory then has an institutional character and is managed by special carriers such as “shamans, bards, griots, priests, teachers, artists, scribes, scholars, mandarins, and others” (Assmann 2011, 39). Cultural memory is based on “fixed points of the past”: formative and important times of the past that are seen as especially important for the present, rather than the past as understood in connection to the scientific study of history. It is in cultural memory that history becomes myth, which, however, “does not make it unreal – on the contrary, this is what makes it real, in the sense that it becomes a lasting, normative, and formative power” (Assmann 2011, 38).

**Fig. 3: Model of Assmann's types of memory:**

Level	Time	Identity	Memory
Inner (neuro-mental)	Inner, subjective time	Inner self	Individual memory
Social	Social time	Social self, person as carrier of social roles	Communicative memory
Cultural	Historical, mythical, cultural time	Cultural identity	Cultural memory

(From Assmann 2008, p. 109)



As Erll points out, the cultural memory of Assmann is not based on *culture* in the broader anthropological sense which would equally apply to communicative memory. Rather, its areas of interest are what Aleida Assmann has called “culture as monument” (as opposed to “culture as lifeworld”) and the “normative and formative versions of the past” (Erll 2011, 30).

Since Assmann uses his concept to describe ancient cultures, it is uncertain how cultural memory should be understood in the context of modern culture – in this connection Assmann instead refers to the works of Aleida Assmann. Jan Assmann’s idea of cultural memory is tied to tradition and religion, which are areas that tend to change over time, and which have arguably lost their former authoritative status in the modern Western world. Furthermore, the infrastructure and media technology of the modern world must have considerable impact on the formation and transmission of memory. For example, everyday communicative memory today is not just “socially mediated,” as Assmann says, but also technologically mediated through social media like Facebook, which in 2011 presented itself as the “Museum of Me.”<sup>33</sup> The *memory boom* – to be discussed more fully later – in which history and memory-related phenomena constitute a veritable trend of contemporary culture, could also be seen as a challenge to the traditional hierarchy of memory. At least, the timespans that Assmann suggests that his levels of memory cover – 80 to 100 years for communicative memory and the “absolute past” of “mythical primordial time” for cultural memory (Assmann 2008, 117) – should be reconsidered in the context of contemporary culture. The official memory culture of museums increasingly includes the recent past. For example, London’s Victoria and Albert Museum recently presented exhibitions on the postmodernism of the 1980s (2011) and the style of rock star David Bowie (2012).<sup>34</sup> The Danish open-air museum Den Gamle By has even opened a whole separate section, which is a recreation of a small Danish town as it looked in 1974 (2010). Also, it is generally recognized that events quickly become parts of the cycle of memorialization on a global level. The attacks of 9/11 in 2001, for instance, immediately became part of the communicative memory worldwide and were soon formalized in artistic forms such as film, art and literature, gaining the status of cultural memory within barely a year.

The upsurge in the interest in memory matters and the complex and changeable character of modern memory could be seen as an argument for Assmann’s model and its elaboration of Halbwach’s collective memory. The informal everyday exchange of communicative memory and

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<sup>33</sup> See for example: [http://gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/intels-museum-of-me-is-about-it/?\\_r=0](http://gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/intels-museum-of-me-is-about-it/?_r=0) (accessed April 2014).

<sup>34</sup> With *Postmodernism: Style and subversion, 1970-1990* (24 September 2011 - 15 January 2012), and *David Bowie is* (23 March - 11 August 2013).

the formalized monuments of cultural memory are a relevant distinction for collective memory, and the relationship and the exchange between them are an important issue. In the case studies in the following chapters, retro will often appear in a position that can be identified as situated between the informal exchange of communicative memory and the more elaborated expressions of cultural memory. In this way, retro may be read as a practice of memory culture where the living memory of the recent past develops into a cultural memory, and gets materialized in recognizable things and symbols. Through retro, then, a *shared past* of, for example, the 1970s in Western culture is being created.

### **History and memory between the canon and the archive**

The status of the past in modern culture is theorized by Aleida Assmann through the categories of the canon and the archive, explaining cultural memory as well as cultural forgetting. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck has claimed that access to historical material will undergo a change over time as “the embodied experience of the survivor’s *present past* gives way to a *pure past* which is disconnected from the sensuous experience.” Also, the “criteria for research become more factual, but they are also perhaps less colorful, less experimental, even if they give promise of greater insight and greater objectivity” (from A. Assmann 2011, 4-5). Aleida Assmann, however, opposes this by claiming that historical matter may actually become more present over time. For example, the Holocaust is not just “silently passing into the custody of professional historians. The temporal distance from the historical event has not made this memory less colorful, but if anything it is now closer and more immediate than ever” (A. Assmann 2011, 5). This revived presence is not based on historical scholarship, but on cultural memory, understood as the ways in which we are “currently facing, reconstructing and discussing new forms of memory that open up an access to the past” (A. Assmann 2011, 6). Consequently, while living memory and individual recollections fade away, cultural memory takes over “within a transgenerational framework, and on an institutional level, within a deliberate policy of remembering and forgetting” (ibid.). Cultural memory is “underpinned by media – by material carriers such as memorials, monuments, museums, and archives,” (Ibid.) and, as Assmann focuses on in her studies, artistic forms such as literature.

The past material can be activated in the present if it is an *inhabited* or *embodied* memory. The inhabited memory is, like Halbwach’s collective memory, connected with some kind of carrier such as a group, an institution or an individual. It is able to build a bridge between the past, the present, and the future, in contrast to the uninhabited memory that splits past from present.

It proceeds selectively by remembering and forgetting, and it provides values that can support the identity and norms of its carriers (A. Assmann 2011, 123). This distinction is elaborated in Aleida Assmann's exploration of the dynamics of the cultural memory between remembering and forgetting. These are equally important processes for cultural memory, and they have both an active and a passive form. The active forgetting is implied in intentional acts such as the destruction of materials and the erasure of mental cultural products. This is a necessary and constructive part of social life, but it may of course also be an act of violent destruction and oppression (A. Assmann 2008, 98). The passive form of forgetting is found in the "non-intentional acts such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning, or leaving something behind" (Ibid.). In such cases, the material objects are not typically destroyed, and they may then get rediscovered later. This is reminiscent of the previously mentioned *rubbish theory* of Michael Thompson (see Chapter 2), which describes how the material life cycles of objects may differ from their economic life cycles. Objects may be actively forgotten when destroyed or thrown away, or they may be passively forgotten when they are stored away or given to flea markets with a potential new life ahead. Another important part of cultural forgetting is repression where "painful or incongruent memories are hidden, displaced, overwritten, and possibly effaced" (A. Assmann 2008, 97).

Similarly, the act of remembering can be active or passive. Assmann illustrates this through the image of the different rooms in the museum: the exhibition rooms present a small selection of the total collection in representative shows arranged to catch attention and be relevant to the present. The objects, or memories, are here elevated to a visible status that "keeps the past *present* as the *canon*" (ibid.). At the same time, however, the museum houses storerooms packed with the rest of its collections, which are not arranged on display for the public in the present. This passively stored memory preserves the *past as past* as part of the *archive* (Ibid.). Like in the museum, artefacts can circulate between these two categories: they may be brought into presence in exhibition rooms, or they may be stored in the archive. As an underlying storage, the archive is a resource for potential active memory, but is of course less present and implies some degree of forgetting: "The archive is a kind of 'lost-and-found office' for what is no longer needed or immediately understood" (A. Assmann 2008, 106).

It is a condition of modern culture that the accumulation of archival material by far exceeds what can be brought back into active presence in individual or social consciousness. Technologies and institutions perform an *externalization of memory*, replacing the human mind as the basis of memory, like in the old tradition of the *ars memoriae*. This tendency was already

criticized by Friedrich Nietzsche in the essay “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874). Here, the philosopher saw the accumulation of knowledge of the past as a threatening dead weight which was alarming to the future of the culture, as it was taking focus from the necessary living memory and the culture’s ability to know itself and learn from its past. And in the age of digital media “the growing rift between the amount of externalized information and internalizable knowledge becomes ever more dramatic,” as Aleida Assmann states (A. Assmann 2008, 104).

This makes the issue of the canon and the archive, and the processes surrounding them, an important one in modern culture – also in regards to retro. Retro regularly implies the reintroduction of forgotten material: the outdated and neglected fashions and undesirable objects of popular culture that may again become fashionable and recognized and achieve some kind of canonic status. This retro canon might be of an unstable and alternative character, compared to the more established and institutionalized forms of memory like museums and archives, and is aimed at the immediate attention of the “now” rather than an eternal recognition as “classic.” Like retro may be identified as having threshold status between communicative memory and cultural memory, it can be described as a process of negotiation between the canon and the archive, or even the refused and forgotten. By taking up the nearly forgotten or outmoded materials, retro asks what is worth remembering and what elements of the past we are able to *inhabit*. Some of the materials that are staged as retro, such as Danish Modern furniture, or several popular music genres, may even enter the established canon, whereas other things stay within retro’s liminal zone, or, are forgotten again.

### ***Lieu de mémoire: the objects of memory***

The works of French historian Pierre Nora have been groundbreaking and much debated in relation to the question of what cultural memory is actually made of. As director of the ambitious project “Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Nora set out to create an encyclopedic mapping of the components of the national memory of France, which was published in seven volumes from 1984 to 1992 (English editions in three and four volumes 1998-2010). The project is centered around Nora’s own concept *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), which has gained general currency, as confirmed by its inclusion in the dictionary *Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française* in 1993. Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* are not necessarily simply physical sites or even tangible objects, such as statues or books, but also include institutions, symbols, practices, and persons. In the books, individual chapters are devoted to “memory sites,” such as real places (like l’Arc de Triomphe and the Wall of the Fédérés, where defenders of the Paris Commune were massacred by the French Army in 1871), symbols, like the

Tricolor; events and festivals (like the the Tour de France, and the battle of Verdun); real people (like René Descartes and Jeanne d' Arc); and mythic figures (like the Good Soldier and Nicolas Chauvin). As Nora says, sites of memory can be “material, symbolic and functional” (Nora 1989, 19), and they are defined as sites “where [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself,” (Nora 1989, 7). In the preface to the English edition of the books, Nora states that “[a] *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community).” The carriers of cultural memory take many forms here, and they unite the material with the symbolic and the functional. They also span from conventional objects of historical importance to the popular and the ordinary, and are created in “a play of memory and history” (Nora 1989 19), fictions and facts. In this way, Nora portrays memorial heritage in a kaleidoscopic and non-hierarchical way that questions as much as confirms the idea of a coherent “France, or, the Frances” as he says.

The presence of the *lieux de mémoire* in modern France is based on an experience of torn memory. The nation’s insistence on such specific embodiments of memory occurs because the “*milieux de mémoire*, the real environments of memory” (Nora 1989, 7) that characterized the pre-modern society, like the old peasant culture of French villages, no longer exists. Through these environments, collectively remembered values were transmitted and conserved in established forms that “prepared a smooth passage from the past to the future or that indicated what the future should keep from the past” (Ibid.). Modernity has caused a “decolonialization” of memory, breaking the established structures and hierarchies of memory, and the past-present-future expectancy. Today, “we are utterly uncertain as to what form the future will take” (Nora 2002), and what will be needed from the past in the future. Paradoxically, this freedom puts us under an obligation to remember and stockpile anything from our present and its past, as we cannot know what we will need in the future. We have a “distance to the future” that was not felt in traditional society where it was very certain what to expect of the future (ibid.). The “acceleration of history” has also created a distance with the past. We “no longer inhabit that past, we only commune with it through vestiges” (ibid.), like the *lieux de mémoire*. Consequently, according to Nora – and in contrast to Aleida Assmann – we are no longer able to embody memory like before. Maybe as a consequence of this view, Nora does not include any contemporary art works or cultural practices as *lieux de mémoire*, even though it is often in these that cultural memory is crystalized as a play between memory and history. A practice like retro, for instance, would obviously be a field “where the cultural memory is crystalized.”

Compared to the official national memory, which Nora criticizes as being compensatory and outdated, retro forms an alternative memory based on modern culture and its sites of memory, which are more significant for contemporary identity.

Nora's mapping of the components of the national memory of France places itself centrally in the renewed interest in history and memory, and has been a direct source of inspiration for similar projects. Examples from Germany include Etienne Francois' and Hagen Schultze's *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (2001), a special volume of *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (Sabrow et al., 2009), which will be further described in Chapter 6, and recently a three-volume set of books on *Europäische Erinnerungsorte* (2011-2012, edited by Boer, Duchhart, Kreis and Schmale) on "die Mythen und Grundbegriffe des europäischen Selbstverständnisses" ("the myths and fundamental concepts of the European self-understanding"). Since the 1980s, the reception of Nora's project has appeared somewhat mystified: "Was this a conservative effort at recovery? Postmodernist irony? Historically accurate?" (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussy and Levy 2011, 437). It could be viewed in relation to certain contemporary tendencies, such as the manifestations of the national heritage in the Canon of Culture published by the Danish Government in 2006, The Canon of Dutch History in Holland in 2006, and the Latvian Cultural Canon published in Latvia in 2007. Nora himself has referred to his position as being "on the side" of the French historical sphere,<sup>35</sup> denouncing any official role.

Nora's definition of a *lieu de mémoire* has also been contested among historians and others working with memory culture, and so has his method of collecting them. The Danish historian Inge Adriansen, for instance, consciously eschews Nora's broad concept to focus on memory sites as attached to specific locations, (Adriansen 2011, 24) such as physical monuments, memorials, and meeting places in her work *Erindringssteder i Danmark* ("Memory Sites in Denmark," 2011). Others use Nora's concept to analyze a specific site of memory over time. Another Danish historian, Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, uses Nora's understanding and notion of a *lieu de mémoire* to follow the representations of a historical event, the siege of Copenhagen in 1659, throughout later history and in the national culture (Olden-Jørgensen 2011). Olden-Jørgensen describes how the memory of a past event may lay dormant, or, to use Aleida Assmann's terms, it may be in the archive of the culture, to be activated in the canon as an important part of the past at

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<sup>35</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Nora](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Nora) (accessed April 2014).

certain times. Olden-Jørgensen also illustrates the many different components of myths, how details get inscribed in them, and the cultural manifestations of myths in their posterity.

Such discussions of the materials of history and memory show the potential of Nora's work in relation to the analysis of retro. Retro is nurtured by a combination of "history" and "memory": the prosaic and documentary historical approach as well as the "affective and magical" memory. As Reynolds states (in Chapter 1), retro is defined in having an amount of historical accuracy, "an element of exact recall," but it is of course also a selective approach to historical time, like the 1950s for instance, that "only accommodates those facts that suit it," as Nora says about memory. In retro this combination is crystalized in "significant entities." Retro culture is made up of many kinds of entities, material and non-material. Material things (from cars to hairpins), symbols (such as patterns or slogans from the past), and practices (like dancing or the use of language) are all used in retro to create a symbolic universe of, for example, "Fiftiesness," as described in Chapter 4.

### **"Present pasts": Memory in contemporary culture**

As Nora's project indicates, memory has been given a new prominence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In his 2002 article "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory" Nora recognizes two main reasons for the "worldwide upsurge in memory," where every kind of social group "has undergone a profound change in the relationship it traditionally enjoyed with the past" (Nora 2002). The first is the "acceleration of history," where *change*, instead of *continuity* or *permanence*, is the prevailing condition, with an uncertainty of both the past and the future as a consequence. The second is what he calls the "democratization of history," which occurs as different groups claim their own past and question the former master narratives. Some of the roots of the current upsurge in memory may then be found in the decolonization of the 1960s, as well as in the new social movements surfacing in the West at the same time, and their search for alternative narratives, for instance to the universalist idea of "progress" in Western modernity. However, the most recognized and debated incentive for the "memory boom" (as Jay Winter labelled the new memory discourse in the article "The Generation of Memory: Reflections of the Memory Boom" in 2001) is the memory of the Holocaust and WWII, intensified since the early 1980s. To use Jan Assmann's concepts, the Holocaust and WWII entered the sphere of cultural memory around the 1980s, when the period of repression was

over, and cultural representations in literature, art, museums and popular culture took over from communicative memory. But the Holocaust is an emblem as well as a particular case of memory culture: it is synchronously seen as impossible to represent or truly remember, *and* as a duty to remember and represent in the present. According to sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, the remembrance of the Holocaust is a new kind of “cosmopolitan memory” that transcends ethnic and national boundaries, and does not so much concern the atrocities themselves, but more how the descendants and the contemporary culture in general copes with the stories and the memories (Levy and Sznaider 2006) – a topic Marianne Hirsch has called “postmemory” (Hirsch 2012, <http://www.postmemory.net/>).

The “memory boom” in contemporary culture, however, contains many other elements. In the essay “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia” (2000/2003)<sup>36</sup>, the German-American cultural critic Andreas Huyssen debates the synchronous “hypertrophy of memory” and amnesia in contemporary culture. According to Huyssen, “the past has become part of the present in ways simply unimaginable in earlier centuries” (Huyssen 2003, 1), and memory has emerged as a surprising “key cultural and political concern in the Western societies” (Huyssen 2003, 11). The compass needle of culture has simply turned from the future to the past. This is described by Huyssen as follows:

[...] a turning towards the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity. From the early twentieth century’s apocalyptic myths of radical breakthrough and the emergence of the “new man” in Europe via the murderous phantasms of racial or class purification in National Socialism and Stalinism to the post-World War II American paradigm of modernization, modernist culture was energized by what one might call “present futures.” Since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts.  
(Huyssen 2003, p. 11).

Retro is emblematic of this turn and often even exhibits the *present futures* of, for example, modernist design and sci-fi visions of the 1950s as *present pasts*. Huyssen also includes “the boom

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<sup>36</sup> The essay was published in Public Culture 12.1 in 2000 and as a chapter in the book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003.



in retro fashions and repro furniture” in the long list of phenomena of present pasts (Huyssen 2003, 14). These include booms in restorations and museums, memoirs and biographies, memory in the visual arts, often through photography, and the “obsessive self-musealization per video recorder” that has obviously been continued in today’s social media. There is also a more traumatic side to memory culture spanning from individual psychology to the memory politics of commemorations, memorials, and historical apologies.

A descriptive concept for the condition outlined above is *musealization*: a term Huyssen borrows from the German philosopher Herman Lübbe. Musealization describes how the expansive historicization in our culture is no longer bound to the institution of the museum but has come to infiltrate all areas of our everyday lives. The declared conservative Lübbe saw this fixation on the past as a compensatory reaction in the absence of valid traditions and stable identities in modern society: "Through a progressive musealization we compensate for the burdensome experience of a loss of cultural familiarity brought about by change" (Lübbe 1982, here from Korff 1999, 268). Another feature of modern culture observed by Lübbe is the shrinking of the present. Because of the ever-increasing speed of technological, scientific and cultural development (cf. Nora’s “acceleration of history”), and the resulting soon-to-be obsolescence built in to the symbols of modernity, the chronological expansion of what can be considered the present is shrinking.

Obviously, it is possible to understand retro, with its exhibiting of the historicity of even the very recent past in all aspects of everyday life, to be included under the term musealization. Through its combination of inwardly oriented activities, like collecting, and the outwardly oriented act of displaying, or staging, such collections, retro in fact mimics traditional museum practices. For example, webpages like Lileks.com (<http://www.lileks.com>) and Go Retro! (<http://goretro.blogspot.dk/>), display galleries of retro material like web-based museums, and likewise, retro shops often function as displays of knowledge and curatorial skills as much as places where things are simply bought and sold, and may be styled as “part gallery, part personal collection” (Gregson and Crewe 2003, 67). Simultaneously, museums increasingly display “retro material,” such as 1970s pop culture items and 1990s computers, in this way contributing to the historicization and musealization of everyday life and the recent past, as well as to the shrinking of the present. This is an expression of a paradox which Huyssen finds in Lübbe’s concept of musealization: museums are themselves “sucked into the vortex of an ever-accelerating circulation of images, spectacles, events, and [are] thus always in danger of losing their ability to guarantee

cultural stability over time” (Huyssen 2003, 24). Museums are a part of the culture industry, and they must offer new experiences to reflect the currents of the cultural memory boom.

This “destabilization of the cultural stability” reflects a fundamental disturbance “of history itself and its promises” (Huyssen 2003, 2). Before the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the categories of history and tradition were able to guarantee “the relative stability of past in its pastness” (Huyssen 2003, 1), and there was a belief in a *meaning* to be learnt from history. Because of this, the nineteenth-century nation-states were able to “mobilize and monumentalize national and universal pasts so as to legitimize and give meaning to the present and to envision the future” (Huyssen 2003, 2). But this no longer works: due to the presence of all the “present pasts” in contemporary culture, there is little belief in actually learning from the past. In all our “re-creations, re-readings, re-productions,” Huyssen finds it necessary to “remember the future” and establish a balance between present pasts and present futures: “We need both past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfaction with the present state of the world. [...] [M]emory discourses are absolutely essential to imagine the future and to regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life and the imagination in a media and consumer society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space” (Huyssen 2003, 6).

It is a central question whether retro is part of this progressive memory culture, or whether it rather belongs to a more passive, conservatively nostalgic and inert circulation of the past. Since retro culture appears in many forms across the cultural landscape, the most adequate answer would be both yes and no. Retro, however, is at least centrally placed in the discussions of memory and musealization in contemporary culture.

Nonetheless, I will state that retro takes an intricate double position as simultaneously a part of the memory boom and a reaction against it. Retro explicates the turning towards the past and the popular evocation of history without the incentive to *learn* something from it. At the same time, however, retro has an oppositional character to the currents of the memory boom. For one thing, retro is a polemical and, at times, critical memory culture that contrasts pasts and presents. Part of what it criticizes are the forces of obsolescence in contemporary culture and the resulting shrinking present. Furthermore, retro goes against the sometimes dominating trauma-based current of the memory boom. The one-sided focus on the atrocities of the past easily leads to “self-indulgence, melancholy fixations, and a problematic privileging of the traumatic dimension of life with no exit in sight” (Ibid.). Retro offers a response that is relieving, and which also deals with a past closer to our everyday experience than the state of emergency of, for example, World War II.

### **The *things* in the cultural memory: Between meaning and presence**

These theories on cultural memory and memory in contemporary culture provide a useful frame for understanding the way retro represents time and historicity in general, and how it works in specific contexts. The past is used in the present by individuals as well as groups in a selective and affective way that combines aspects of the past with present hopes and wishes. The cultural memory can be conserving and restorative, but it may also have a reflexive and progressive potential. I will now briefly discuss the question of *things* in cultural memory with the previous chapter's review of materiality and culture in mind. Cultural memory is very often based on oral narration, testimonies and written narratives. This causes the field to be somewhat dominated by literature and text-based media, while visual culture and material artefacts are assigned a secondary role. Textbooks like Astrid Erll's *Memory in Culture* (2011) and *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008), for instance, contain chapters on literature and cultural memory, but none about visual art or objects and cultural memory. This is arguably related to the high number of literary historians in the academic field of cultural memory studies, such as Aleida Assmann, Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney and Svetlana Boym, as well as the text-based approach of many historians and sociologists. Bjørnar Olsen, for one, has recognized how *things* and their significance are often somewhat neglected in memory studies. Even when things are acknowledged as part of cultural memory, they are not given much agency, but are rather seen as *inscribed* with meaning or as *representations* of something. According to Olsen, this is true of Nora's *lieu de mémoire* as well as of Assmann's cultural memory, neither of which consider the material presence of *things* as such. Thus, Olsen finds it necessary to "highlight the crucial role that things play in upholding the past, thus enabling various forms of memory" (Olsen 2010, 108). Like Olivier mentioned in the previous chapter, Olsen opposes the perception of the present as just made up of "2014-things" and the past as simply gone, materially vanished, and left only to be recalled by the human mind. Instead, things should be understood as active and important parts of every memorization and experience of the past: "Things are not just traces or residues of absent presents; they are effectively engaged in assembling and hybridizing periods and epochs. As durable matter, things make the past present and tangible; they constantly resist the regime that has subjugated time to the prevailing image of it as instantaneous and irreversible" (ibid.). Once again, we may think of how material presence often outlasts social and economic value, as explained in Thompson's *rubbish theory*, which is a reason as to why *things* make up such an essential component of retro culture.

One way to acknowledge the presence of things is through the *presence theory* formulated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. According to Gumbrecht, modern Western thinking has been characterized by a

“broadly institutionalized tradition according to which interpretation, that is, the identification and/or attribution of meaning, is the core practice indeed, of the humanities” (Gumbrecht 2004, 1-2). This focus on the identification and attribution of *meaning* and hermeneutics is backed by the general valorization of “depth” in favor of the “superficial” material and bodily world: the present world “in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies” (Gumbrecht 2004, 17). Gumbrecht even introduces the distinction between the arch types of “meaning cultures” and “presence cultures.” Meaning cultures have the mind as the dominant human self-reference and see the human subject as exclusively separated from the world. Presence cultures have the body as the dominant self-reference, and see bodies as part of a cosmology in-the-world, in a spatial and physical way (Gumbrecht 2004, 80). Gumbrecht does not dismiss the meaning culture, but advocates “a relation to the things in the world that could oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects” (Gumbrecht 2004, xv). He has himself tried to challenge the meaning-based approach to history in the book *In 1926: Living at the edge of time* (1997). Through descriptions of objects and practices such as jazz music and flying machines, Gumbrecht attempts to produce a presence of the world of 1926 for the reader as an alternative to “learning from history.”

Such a presence-based approach is also used by the Dutch historian Eelco Runia. In the article “Presence” (2006) Runia characterizes the usual approach to history as led by a “transfer of meaning.” This was the case for the way meaning was read into history until the 1960s, as well as later historiography’s equally meaning-focused critique of meaning (Runia 2006, 1-2). As Runia states, however, this does not apply to the role that history and historicity *really* play in human life: “It is not a need for meaning that manifests itself in, for example, nostalgia and retro-styles, in the penchant for commemorations, in the enthusiasm for remembrance, in the desire for monuments, in the fascination for memory” (Runia 2006, 5). According to Runia, what we want is not “*meaning*,” but “what for the lack of a better word [he] will call ‘presence’” (ibid.). This presence is by Runia defined as “being in touch” with the world and with the “people, things, events and feelings that made you into the person you are” (ibid.). Where traditional history works as a “transfer of meaning,” Runia wants to establish a “transfer of presence” that works by metonymy rather than metaphor.

The dangers of this presence-based approach to the past are a lack of criticism, even naivety, and a submission to the contemporary culture’s demand for experience and events. Indeed presence remains a vaguely defined term. In Gumbrecht it is tied to the bodily and sensory experience of being-in-the-world, whereas for Runia it is connected to identity in a more or less

concrete sense. Retro is hardly a pure “presence culture” based on a shared cosmology with the material surroundings and a bodily experience of the world. Neither is retro based on a direct connection with the revived past: it is not the heirlooms or the souvenirs from the individual’s past and “what made you into the person you are.” It is rather an ironic and ambiguous production of presence. Still, presence is a necessary element for a valid description of the incentive for retro, compared to the historiographical study of the past or the policy of official institutions. The term is also able to give prominence to *things* and to understand their presence in the present as a pivotal point. It is still necessary, however, to take the difference of the past into account, since retro is also a recognition of differences between the past and the present and a wish to view “the past as a foreign country.”

## **Conclusion: Retro and Cultural Memory**

As Halbwachs’ understanding of the term collective memory implies, it describes the way an individual’s memory and conception of the past is formed by social and cultural groups, and the way these groups are constituted through a shared vision of the past. This can be applied to retro, where the individual uses commonly recognized signs of a certain past such as a “1970s disco shirt” or a “1950s Bettie Page dress” as an individual statement, and where groups are constituted through a common usage of the past.

Jan Assmann’s levels of memory place retro in an interesting position *in between* the casual everyday remembrance associated with the term *communicative memory* and the institutionalized and formalized *cultural memory*. In modern culture, this must be complemented with the dynamics of accelerated change and the accumulation of memory. This can be characterized through Aleida Assmann’s descriptions of active and passive memory and forgetfulness in the canon and its archive status.

Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* describes the way many different kinds of entities – material, symbolic and functional – are united to create a symbolic universe. This also happens in retro culture, where these elements are brought together to create a common vision of, for example, *Fiftiesness*, in a combination of history and memory, as unfolded in the next chapter.

Memory is a current topic in contemporary culture, which experiences both a veritable “memory boom,” and, paradoxically, amnesia, as well as a hypertrophy of memory, as Huyssen observes. As

an element of this cultural condition, retro has an intricate double position, on the one hand functioning as a part of the economy and industry of “selling the past” (“The past is a foreign country with a thriving tourist industry,” as historian David Lowenthal has said (Lowenthal 2013)), but on the other taking an oppositional stance towards this commercialization. An important concept here is “musealization,” describing the way historicizing and staging the past has entered all aspects of our culture. Musealization seems to be a compensatory reaction against the acceleration of history and its changes and the quick obsolescence of objects and ideas implied by the constant promotion of “this year’s model.” The intensive musealization, however, actually contributes to the rapid changes and instability of history, Huyssen argues.

Drawing on the theories of Gumbrecht and Runia, I will suggest that retro’s relationship to the past is productively understood as based on presence, or at least in an oscillation between meaning effects and presence effects. This also includes *things* as a basis for retro culture and the way it revives the past in the present.

## Chapter 4:

# The framing of the Fifties: a reading of the historical development of retro

### Introduction

Having established the theoretical background in the previous chapter, I will now focus on the project's main subject: the objects and practices of retro. This chapter analyzes the 1950s as a subject for retro revival. This decade in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been particularly popular, forming a heartland for retro ever since the early 1970s. This, at least, is the case for the very contemporary culture where *the Fifties* are intensively used as a stylistic image and popular cultural myth. The distinct reference to the 1950s is clearly visible in the cultural landscape of today in a multitude of places from vintage fashion to casual accessories; from established art forms such as film and music to ephemeral categories like underwear, makeup and food; and in organizational forms from subcultural groups like rockabilly revivalists to municipal festivals and museum exhibitions. The revival is happening at many levels and involves many practices, practitioners and objects.

In this chapter, I will analyze the historical background for the current presence of the 1950s by going through the revivals of this decade, which began as early as the turn of the 1970s. As analytical tools the former chapter's description of *things* in modern culture and retro as cultural memory will be used. The historical rendition will also sum up writings about retro culture from different contexts, making this chapter a contribution to the reception history of retro and the memory of the 1950s more broadly.

My analysis will use material from many sources, from popular culture to the critical debate and cultural theory of the era. I will often refer to movies and popular music, as these are the main genres for the representation of the 1950s and the production of "Fiftiesness": these media are often themselves associated with 1950s culture, and often refer knowingly to each other, or are sometimes even combined, as in *American Graffiti*, (1973) as well as in contemporary music videos. These are examples of how retro is often characterized by a transgression of genre borders and conventional cultural hierarchies.

As the popular images of the Fifties are focused on the US American 1950s, my analysis will focus on white Western culture. Retro culture depicts, reflects, and sometimes criticizes the self-image of the 1950s (the first decade with the ability to represent itself on television), with its restricted gender roles and main focus on the white, Western middle class. This would become different in the depiction of the 1970s of the contemporary 70s-focused retro culture, where Afro-American culture and its social and political issues are present even if in a somewhat stereotyped form. I will discuss the issue of different experiences of the post-1945 modern world, and how local context and cultural identities are reflected in retro culture, in the following two chapters' case studies of retro culture in the contexts of Montreal and Berlin, with their complex and contested modern histories and contemporary identities. In this chapter, I will focus on the development of retro culture in the USA, Britain, and in the description of contemporary culture I will include cases from Denmark to reflect the current distribution of retro.

## The invention of the Fifties – and retro

### The French *mode rétro*

As mentioned in the introduction, the first isolation of the term 'retro' was the French *mode retro* (registered in 1973) and its controversial aestheticization of the 1940s occupation years. After the events of 1968 and the resignation of Charles de Gaulle the following year, a new critical light was shone on the traumatic period and the mythologies around it, for example in Marcel Ophüls' documentary film *Le Chagrin de la pitié* (1969). This led to "a broader reevaluation of France's war years that was sweepingly called the *mode rétro*" (Guffey 2006, 118), which influenced the public debate of newspapers, journals and books as well as cultural forms such as cinema, fashion and music. One of French pop's most important figures, Serge Gainsbourg's album *Rock around the Bunker* (1975), for instance, contained songs with titles like "Nazi Rock" and "S.S. in Uruguay."<sup>37</sup> In particular, cinema and haute couture fashion were central media of the *mode rétro*. Between 1974 and 1978, no less than 45 French films were set in World War II and collaborators (like *Lacombe Lucien* (1974)) were often depicted without moral retribution but rather in the form of a

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<sup>37</sup> A once scandalous now often forgotten album by the popular artist, *Rock around the Bunker* is a complex work uniting different levels of retro and reference to the past. It reflects personal memories of the Nazi occupation from a Jewish child and refers generally to the repressed period in the French cultural memory. It delivers comics-like portraits of Nazi characters in a carnivalesque retro, and combines this with the 1970s revival of 1950s rock 'n' roll.



loyal representation of the era's look and style. Simultaneously, fashion designers introduced collections reminiscent of the 1940s, including "fur wraps, platform shoes, and low-cut, tight-fitting dresses that represented a vision of the 1940's dominated by female collaborators rather than Gaullist heroines" (Guffey 2006, 120). One example would be Yves Saint Laurent's 1971 collection *Hommage aux Années 40* (ill. 8, p. 109) which was described with designations like "World War Two floozy look" or "Forties Camp" (ibid.).

This controversial use of a troubled past was criticized from both the right and the left, among others by Michel Foucault, for being a stylized, apolitical and amoral use of history (Austin 1996, 29). I will also argue that it is *mode rétro* that Jean Baudrillard comments upon in the essay "History: A Retro Scenario," appearing in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), when he mentions the "omnipresence of fascism and of war in retro":

[...] [T]oday one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references. It is into this void that the phantasms of the past recede, the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions – no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when at least there was history, at least there was violence (albeit fascist), when at least life and death were at stake.

(Baudrillard 1994, p. 44)

Contrary to the theories of cultural memory described in the previous chapter, Baudrillard denies the ability to establish any kind of contact with the past, so that all that is left are simulacra – representations without references. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it is my aim to polemicize this negative position as an automatic reaction towards retro. I will not elaborate further upon this here, but point out that retro is generally directed towards a civil past, often in contrast to the dramatic cultural memory of WWII in Western culture.

### **The 1970s and the birth of Fiftiesness**

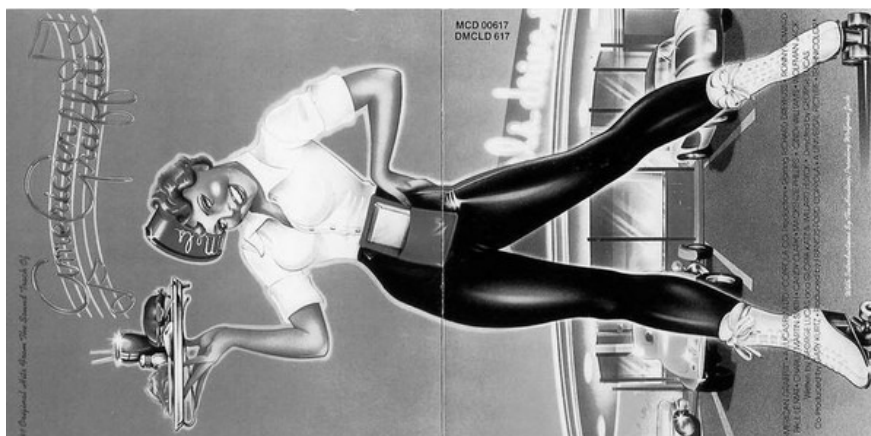
Subsequently, the term *retro* began to appear in English (as mentioned, it was first registered in 1974). This corresponds with an interest in the popular styles of the recent past, centered on the 1950s, rather than WWII, emerging in 1970s culture. Particularly in American 70s culture, 1950s-



III. 8: Hommages aux Années 40, from the exhibition *Yves Saint Laurent, a visionary* (2013) ING Cultural Centre, Brussels 2013.



III. 9: Sha-Na-Na in the mid-1970s.



III. 10: The cover of the soundtrack album *American Graffiti*, MCA Records 1973.

nostalgia was recognized and debated. In 1972, Newsweek brought the cover story “Yearning for the Fifties: The Good Old Days,” which stated that “[i]n the grand sweep of American history, the 1950s were one of the blandest decades ever. But now a revival of those very same quiet years is swirling across the U.S. like a runaway Hoola-hop” (here from Hurup 1992, 56). Another article, “The New Nostalgia Yearns for the Apathetic Fifties” in the Florida newspaper St. Petersburg Times in 1971 reports of 1950s nostalgia as a “campus trend” which according to the author must have been met by horror and fascination by those who grew up in the decade: “Horror because it reminds us about how fast time passes and how quickly a generation becomes transmogrified. Fascination because we cannot imagine anyone finding that much to admire about the Apathetic Fifties.” (Dickinson 1971). “It was a prim decade of crew cuts, cord pants, bobby socks, football weekends, pinning parties, proms homecoming queens, pony tails, 3.2 beer, Hula Hoops, party raids, petting, fins and tails,” the article states, describing the 1950s as bland, boring and without style. 1970s popular culture, however, did not agree and went into a consequent *framing* of the 1950s.

Arguably, the first revival of the 1950s took place at the Woodstock Festival in 1969. At this alleged manifestation of the counter culture and its new culture of acid rock and protest folk music, the rock’n’roll show group Sha-Na-Na performed authentic 1950’s songs and original paraphrases such as “At the Hop” and “Teen Angel.” The group performed their songs in costumes of leather jackets, t-shirts with rolled up sleeves, greaser hair, and with a choreography of 1950s dance moves creating an “impossibly upbeat and exuberant version of the 1950s” (Guffey 2006, 98). The members were students at Columbia University and reportedly admirers of Susan Sontag’s camp and Andy Warhol’s pop art (Guffey 2006, Reynolds 2011). The group was formed after the student riots at the university in 1968 and used slogans such as “Jocks! Freaks! ROTC! SDS! Let there be a truce! Bury the Hatchet (not in each other)! Remember when we were all little greaseballs together!” (Reynolds 2011, 284), more or less attempting to heal the difficulties of the moment with a carnivalistic nostalgia of the recent past; the “pre-political teenage Eden of the fifties,” as the group’s leader George Leonard has said (*ibid.*). With their campy pastiches Sha-Na-Na produced a recognizable versioning of the 1950s that immediately became popular. In the late 1970s, Sha-Na-Na even had their own TV-show and appeared in the iconic 1950s revival movie *Grease* (1978).

Generally, as Reynolds claims, “[p]op culture in the first half of the seventies was in large part defined by this yearning to return to the fifties. The nostalgia craze spilled beyond music

to movies and television. And it carried on into the late seventies and, fitfully, the eighties too. The fifties just kept coming back, wave after wave of never-ending revivalism” (Reynolds 2011, 277). A well-known example is the persistent wave of movies enthusiastically depicting 1950s youth culture. This genre arguably started with the bleak black and white *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and had its breakthrough with George Lucas’ *American Graffiti* (1973). In addition to a serious portrayal of the site- and time-specific youth culture of California, the latter featured a soundtrack of rock’n’roll, pop and doo-woop songs from the 1950s, instead of a newly-produced score, thus using the music of the recent past to a then unseen degree. The movie is set in 1962, a year that marks the end of the main character’s innocent youth and the 1950s epoch. At the end of the movie, the future of the characters in the turmoil of the 1960s is foreseen contrasted to the 1950s universe. This universe was again the backdrop in productions such as the TV-series *Happy Days* (1974-1984), and the movies *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976), *The Buddy Holly Story*, *American Hot Wax*, *Grease*, *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (all 1978), and in the 1980s, *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). In each of these movies, a recognizable 50s image is presented and a collective memory of the 1950s is formed. As Elsebeth Hurup states in her analysis of *American Graffiti*, *Grease*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married*, the 1950s have through these movies become a “cultural icon” as “the adolescence of modern America” (Hurup 1992, 73). The 1950s is an image of adolescence and growing up in a simple and innocent age, but also in an affluent and dynamic world with new *things*, from kitchen machines to spacecrafts. Thus, the 1950s are assigned a role as simultaneously “old-fashioned” and “modern.” It is a different period from the present, but also a preliminary stage of the present world, and in direct affinity with it.

This affinity is evident in the success of *Grease*. As a musical, *Grease* originally premiered in 1972, aimed at a specific New York audience, who were in their thirties, had actually been young in the 1950s, and wanted to revive their past (Guffey 2006, 111). But to the surprise of its producers, *Grease* caught the attention of a much broader audience of youths, eager to inhabit the 1950s mythology. This success culminated in the high-grossing movie version of 1978, featuring teenage idols John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John.

Film historian Christine Sprengler has analyzed how the 1950s have become the “privileged object” of modern nostalgia, and how the *nostalgia film* as a distinct genre evolves around the representation of the 1950s. An important feature of this is the way 1970s movies created a very recognizable universe of period pieces such as cars, clothing, and commodities, and

of cultural references like music and movies. As “populuxe props” they create *The Fifties* – a specific mythical, nostalgic construction, opposed to the historical time from 1950 to 1959 with all its social, political and cultural complexities (Sprengler 2009, 39). Fredric Jameson has also observed, and commented on, the nostalgia film and its representation of the 1950s. According to Jameson, the historical 1950s have been effaced by the “Fiftiesness” of contemporary culture’s critique-less representations (he mentions *American Graffiti* as an example). The works of postmodern culture are “not able to represent our historical past so much as they represent our ideas or cultural stereotypes about that past,” and that further “we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 1998, 10). Sprengler modifies this view by stating that “There is much about the 1950s that sources the Fifties including the period’s images of itself” (Sprengler 2009, 39). Apart from the historical references to the period, including some of its social, political and cultural realities, the depiction of the 1950s as seen in nostalgia movies often refers to the decade’s own self-representation. As Sprengler notes, the 1950s were the first decade to represent itself in mass-media and popular culture (Sprengler 2009, 41). TV-series that became popular in the 1950s, for instance, often depicted everyday culture more closely than cinema tended to do before.

Also, the presence of *things* from the 1950s is not imaginary: such things exist materially in the present. The soundtrack to *American Graffiti* was present in the 1973 world of 1950s cultural objects being played and distributed beyond the level of generational nostalgia or historical dressing up. In this way, the 1950s songs are obviously a *past as present* rather than a *past as past*, according to the concepts of Aleida Assmann. It would even influence contemporary culture as a whole, not least through the wave of 1950s revivalism that swept in the popular music landscape of the 1970s. In the early 70s, tone-setting styles such as glam rock, pub rock, roots rock and proto-punk manifestly referred to the early days of rock’n’roll in sound and style (Reynolds 2011), and did this simultaneously with a more traditionally nostalgic revival in the general mainstream pop. Many of the new rock stars of the 1970s had hit songs about the 1950s such as Elton John’s “Crocodile Rock” (1972), David Bowie’s “Drive-in Saturday” (1973), Gary Glitter’s “Rock and Roll part I and II” (1972) and Marc Bolan of T-Rex: “I Love to Boogie” (1976). These songs are filled with “populuxe props” and the evocation of *Fiftiesness*: remembering “when rock was young” and having a Chevy car and blue jeans in “Crocodile Rock,” drive-in cinemas and sci-fi movies accompanied by doo-wop choruses in “Drive-In Saturday,” and “Highschool boogie, Jitterbug boogie,” tailfins and Cadillacs in “I Love to Boogie.” These British performers also

mention memorialization and nostalgic recall, but not as personal memory and not with any details of the British 1950s. Instead, they refer to a mythical American world of rock'n'roll, cars and prom dances reminiscent of the aforementioned movies. This applies to the idea of a mythologized and generally recognized Fiftiesness rather than the historical 1950s.

### **Authenticity and carnivalism**

A unique phenomena in the early 1970s were entire albums of cover versions of early rock'n'roll songs. Such albums were made by among others Bryan Ferry (*These Foolish Things*, 1973), David Bowie (*Pin-Ups*, 1973), The Band (*Moondog Matinee*, 1973) and John Lennon (*Rock 'n' Roll*, 1975). Roy Wood and Wizzard's *Introducing Eddy and the Falcons* (1974) should also be mentioned, not composed of covers but by pastiches of typical 1950s styles. These albums had different relationships with the past – the efforts of Bryan Ferry, for instance, being somewhat mannered. Lennon's album, however, seems genuinely dedicated, and I will describe it more closely as an example of *authenticity-based retro*.

Lennon's album contains versions of standards such as Gene Vincent's "Bebop-a-lula," Chuck Berry's "Sweet Little Sixteen" and Buddy Holly's "Peggy Sue." These are authentic 1950s songs, having formed Lennon's musical coming of age, as well as being parts of the early repertoire of The Beatles. The establishment of personal authenticity and integrity seems to characterize the album. As Reynolds writes, Lennon's early solo albums such as *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* (1970) were "primal-scream therapy meets back-to-basics rock 'n' roll" (Reynolds 2011, 288), while Lennon repeatedly stated his preference for "simple rock and nothing else" rather than contemporary musical styles. *Rock 'n' Roll* seems to explicate this poetics and establish a presence in the present of the past. Lennon performs the music that made "him into the person he is" (and wants to be), to refer to Runia's definition of presence. The album cover (ill. 11, p. 115) also underscores this image of an authentic relation to the past. It is made of a black and white photograph of a young Lennon standing in a run down doorway, wearing an almost archetypal rock'n'roll look with greaser hair, black leather jacket, jeans and boots. The photo originates from one of The Beatles' early stays in Hamburg – the authentic rock 'n' roll past that Lennon was allegedly most found of. The title "John Lennon Rock 'n' Roll" has been added to the photo in the form of a Fifties-connoting neon sign over the door, as if it were a raw cellar club. The young greaser Lennon stands like an angry young man, hanging at the side of the street,

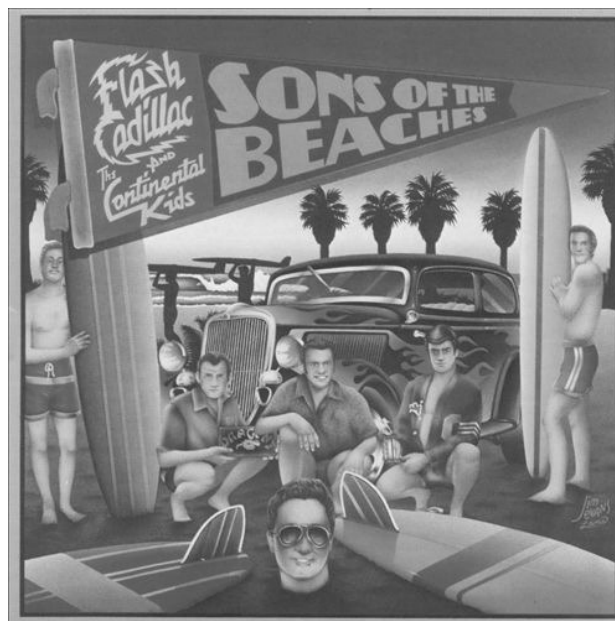
nonchalantly looking at the world, but also as the doorman of his own musical world and cultural identity – the Fifties!

Lennon's use of the past is seemingly sincere and admiring, even restorative, and the album signals authenticity and claims a true essence on a cultural as well as a personal level: according to Lennon, the 1950s rock'n'roll equals the essentially true and beautiful, and is especially integrated in his own person. Along with the primal scream therapy that Lennon practiced at the time, the remembrance of 1950s rock'n'roll music works as a process of catharsis in a confused present. This is materialized in the music's sincere and straight-forward interpretations of the songs as well as in the cover art and its literal and biographical remembering of the 1950s. This authenticity-based self-representation is supported by the cover's use of the photography and this medium's attached mythology of being especially true and immediate. For example, Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1979) describes how a photograph always points to "that-has-been" and is a frozen moment that will "touch [him] like the delayed rays of a star" (Barthes 1981, 81). Barthes reflects that the photography is a pointing out of the passage of time as well as a stopping of time. This harmonizes with Lennon's wish to go back to his former cultural standpoint and express himself in a specifically authentic way. As described in Chapter 1, the authentic means "that which is equal to itself" and thus has a truth with an authority from itself. In newer cultural history, the authentic has been directed towards the personal and, increasingly in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, towards all kinds of things and expressions which can be attributed with historical and aesthetic significance (Dehs 2012, 25). In this way, it is a central concept for retro: Retro invests an amount of authenticity into previously despised and *inauthentic* artifacts – like early rock'n'roll songs of the 50s. In the case of Lennon's rock 'n' roll, the authenticity is of a more subjectivity-based kind directed towards the self and its artistic expression, not without reminiscences of the idea of the modernist artist searching for an authentic subjectivity, and going back to the essential forms of the artistic media.

The authenticity-based retro that Lennon's *Rock 'n' Roll* expresses can be contrasted to a different more distanced exposure of Fiftiesness in 1970s pop culture. Sha-Na-Na's theatrical performance of the 1950s rock and roll with flashy costumes and wild choreography, for instance, was not motivated by any personal connection to the era or the claim of an essence of truth (as Reynolds states, the Columbia students would not have been likely to have been greasers in the past, they are more likely to have been scared of such greasers and socially distant from them!). Instead, the group delivered a staged and stylized image of the 1950s in sound and vision. A similar



**Ill. 11: John Lennon: *Rock and Roll*, Parlophone Records 1975.**



**Ill. 12: Flash Cadillac and the Continental Kids: *Sons of the Beaches*, Private Stock Records 1975.**



example is the band Flash Cadillac and the Continental Kids, and their 1975 album *Sons of the Beaches*. Like Sha-Na-Na, the group performed humoristic pastiches of early rock from the 1950s and 1960s. They appeared in the movie *American Graffiti* as the band “Herbie and the Heartbeats,” as well as in the TV-series *Happy Days*, and thus had a central role in the 1950s revival. The group’s name itself is filled with Fiftiesness – even if it sounds more like a retrospective pastiche than an authentic 1950s artistic alias. The album *Sons of the Beaches* is thematically directed towards the early 1960s surf music and its symbolic universe but do also contain rock’n’roll songs like “Good Times, Rock ‘n’ Roll” and “See My Baby Jive” (originally written by Roy Wood for the English group Wizzard who also made heavy use of 1950s references). Surf culture could easily be seen as belonging to the cultural Fifties, which according to Thomas Hine spans from 1954 to 1964 (Hine 1986), being associated with pre-1968 youth culture and pre-Beatles music. The cover is done in airbrush painting by the comics and surf artist Jim Evans and is thus materially associated with its subject (Ill. 12, p. 115). It depicts the group standing in 1960s surf outfits with shirts and short hair and, of course, surfboards and a hot rod car. The title of the album is written on a college flag, and the back of the cover shows photos of the group as a school sports team, easily associated with the Fiftiesness image of teenage America. The cover creates a dressed-up and highly stylized image of the 1950s and the early 1960s obviously putting together different themes such as surfing and the All-American high school life. “Fifties means fun” seems to be the slogan in this *carnivalistic*<sup>38</sup> retro form. The carnivalistic is immediately associated with the fun, the laughable and the theatrical. But as Mikhail Bakhtin has interpreted the term, the carnival is an important cultural feature as a state of exception where the order of the normal world is turned upside-down. This can be used both subversively, or, in order to contribute to the endurance of the existing order. In 1970s America, the 50s had a carnivalesque role as the “campus trend” of theme parties mentioned in the newspaper articles bringing back the previously so “bland” and “apathetic” decade. Here, the students could step out of their usual roles as “jocks, freaks, ROTC or SDS.” Also, it would be easy to see the 70s nostalgia for the 50s as a relieving break from the atmosphere of crisis, and, as a backwash after the turbulent 1960s, as a conservative nostalgia. It should be stated, however, that taking up the 50s was in fact a slightly controversial choice, since they were a much-despised era, as expressed in the previously referred newspaper quotes. The *Fiftiesness* evoked in movies and music in that way was

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<sup>38</sup> In their article “Bjorn Again: Rethinking 70s Revivalism through the Reappropriation of 70s Clothing,” Nicky Gregson, Kate Brooks and Louise Crewe characterize the use of 1970s clothing at theme- and costume parties as expressing a “carnavalesque mode” of retro different from the “knowing mode” of the dedicated collector. My use of the term is inspired by this, but also developed further and aimed at another subject matter.

a counter image to the image of the 1950s as grey, utterly restrictive and dull – another stereotypical view of the 1950s.

In his account on nostalgia Fred Davis describes the 1970s as characterized by a wave of popular nostalgia. According to Davis, nostalgia entered the popular speech of America in the 1950s as a “fancy word,” but had really caught on in the 1970s with a new meaning, now positively tinged and thus available for commercial use (Davis 1979, 4-5). “Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be,” Davis claims: It is getting more media-based and as the limits between the private and the public gets blurred nostalgia becomes collective and cultural in a new way, also strengthened by its commercialization (Davis 1979, 125).

The popular revival of the recent past in the 1970s and its ‘framing of the Fifties’ is an obvious formative phase for retro and a background for subsequent revivals of the 1950s. It did also feature a more subcultural revival of the “Teddy Boy”<sup>39</sup> subculture of 1950s England in London, as Guffey mentions (Guffey 2006, 103). At the big rock’n’roll revival concert show at Wembley in 1972 (itself an early example of the Fifties revival), for instance, the Teds were present again, and soon shops that specialized in rock’n’roll records and Ted-inspired clothing opened. This recognition of the aesthetics of a subculture occurred at the same time as the subcultural studies of the Birmingham school (described in Chapter 2) and, in the more popular vein, the pulp novels of Richard Allen such as *Skinhead* (1970) and *Boot Boys* (1972). Arguably, another factor in the acknowledgement of the 1950s was the historical consciousness rising in the otherwise fast and ever-changing rock culture. Around 1970 books and biographies on artists and styles started to appear, along with a record collector culture inspired by jazz and blues, and also, the first *come-backs* and *oldies tours* featuring the 1950s artists began.

The decade also saw the emergence of vintage fashion as another way of looking towards the past. Over a long period, from the emergence of mass-produced clothing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1970s, second-hand clothing was almost entirely associated with poverty, and only distributed as charity. As Angela McRobbie (1988) has described, however, second-hand clothing was an important part of the new subcultures from hippies to punks, creating a new alternative market and seen as a part of underground culture. According to sociologist Nancy Fischer, this was reflected in an increasing number of articles in fashion and youth magazines, such as “Rags to Riches,” “Secondhand Chic,” “Dressing in Antique Clothes,” and “Boom in Vintage Clothes”

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<sup>39</sup> The Teddy Boys was a British working class-based subculture characterized by a preference for American rock’n’roll and a style of clothing partly inspired by the British Edwardian period in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

(Fischer 2012, 7). At the end of the decade the word ‘retro’ even started to appear in the magazines’ coverage of fashion and style (“Retro Dressing” *Essence Magazine* 1979 and “Retro: A Reprise” Kennedy Fraser 1980) (Fischer 2012, 8). In this way, retro had emerged in the cultural landscape, to gain broader recognition in the following decades.

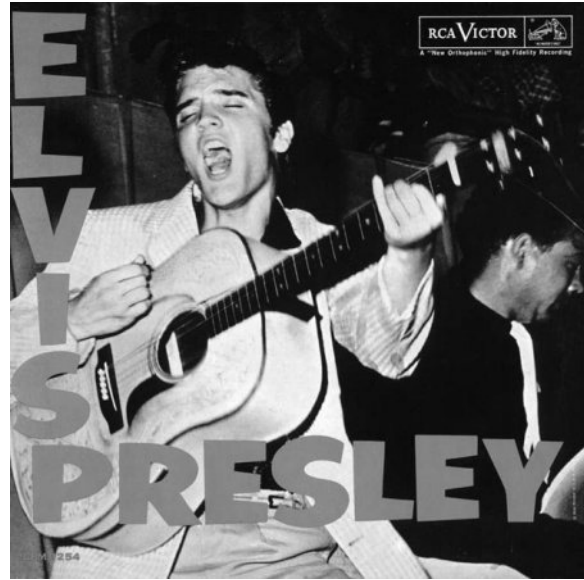
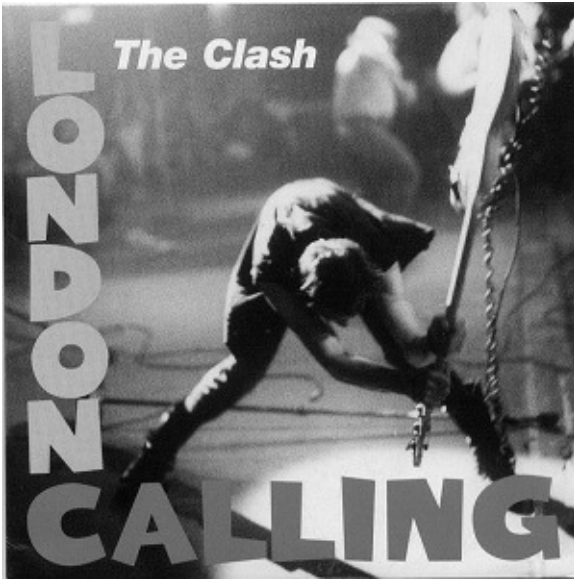
### **Punkish Fifties**

As Reynolds formulates it, different “essences” have come out of the 1950s (Reynolds 2011, 294). The innocent “adolescence of modern America” which dominated the wave of 1970s nostalgia was one such essence. Another was created around the punk movement. Here, it was not innocence, but the febrile sexuality and the underground obscurity of some of the 1950s popular culture that was revived, for example through the “rockabilly revival” of bands like The Cramps. As Reynolds polemically states, the alleged punk revolution was “a concerned effort to turn back the clock to rock’s teenage past, to fifties rock’n’roll and sixties garage” (Reynolds 2011, 240). It was initiated by a cast of “embittered rock critics and nostalgic fanzine editors, obsessive garage-punk compilers and professional reissuers, dusty-fingered record collectors and discographers, second-hand vinyl dealers and vintage clothing retailers,” (Reynolds 2011, 241) more expected to start a historical magazine than a revolution. Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, for instance had opened the shop *Let it Rock* in 1971 with designer Vivienne Westwood selling 1950s Teddy Boy revival clothes. The simple, energetic sound of punk bands could be traced back to early rock and roll, and the shabby leather jackets and outdated suits from the 1950s were important parts of punk style’s bricolage.

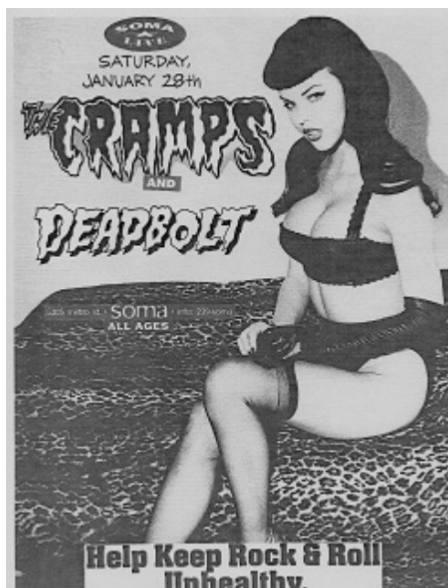
In parallel to the authenticity-based and more carnivalistic references to the 1950s in the 1970s just described, similar types of references are found in the the punk and new wave styles around 1980. Again, I will illustrate this by way of two pieces of album cover art: *London Calling* (1980) by British punk group The Clash and *Wild Planet* (1980) by American “new wave”<sup>40</sup> group The B-52’s. Both of these images depict versions of Fiftiesness and use 1950s material objects as well as the *cultural memory* of The Fifties: a shared past commonly remembered according to the theories of Assmann, etc.

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<sup>40</sup> New Wave is a commonly used umbrella term for rock and pop music inspired by punk. The definition from Meriam-Webster’s dictionary is: “popular music less raw than punk rock and typically including unconventional melodies, exaggerated beats, and quirky lyrics” ([www.meriam-webster.com](http://www.meriam-webster.com)), (see also Cateforis (2011)). According some, the term was coined by Malcolm McLaren inspired by the French Nouvelle Vague in cinema (Stanley 2013, 451).



Ill. 13: The Clash: *London Calling*, CBS Records 1980 and *Elvis Presley*, RCA Victor 1956.



Ill. 14: Concert flyer for The Cramps and Lux Interior and Poison Ivy in concert.

The Clash's *London Calling* was a double LP where the group expanded their repertoire to include many musical styles and themes. Among these was the rockabilly sound of "Brand New Cadillac," originally written by cult rock'n'roller Vince Taylor in 1959. The album's cover (Ill. 13, p. 119) also pays tribute to the 1950s. It features a black and white photo of bass player Paul Simonon as he is about to smash his bass guitar against the stage floor during the 1979 US tour, where photographer Pennie Smith followed the band. The slightly out-of-focus snapshot shows an iconic rock gesture: the rebellion and exuberance of destroying the instrument, as famously started by The Who in the 1960s. The obvious 50s-reference, however, is that made by the lettering to the first Elvis Presley album (*Elvis Presley*, 1956). The bright green and pink letters on Elvis' LP, drawn by designer Ray Lowry, were copied for the Clash album, and like the Elvis album, *London Calling*'s photo shows the artist in a performance situation in black and white. Both the cover of *London Calling* and the album have become canonical classics. The album was voted the all-time best album by Q Magazine in 2001 and 2002, and the cover appeared as one out of ten album covers in a series of postal stamps issued by the Royal Mail in 2010. Paul Simonon's bass from the cover is even exhibited at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio – an example of the *musealization* of rock.

With its live-photo representing the artist's expressive wildness, the cover connotes authenticity in its raw expressivity as well as being a carefully constructed depiction of rock'n'roll imagery. Again, the photo's assumed status of being an imprint of reality is used to create this feeling of authenticity. The album is described as "incorporating the punk aesthetic into rock & roll mythology and roots music,"<sup>41</sup> and the reference to Elvis' cover supports this confident walking into the rock canon as a *materialization* of rock'n'roll. At the same time, however, the cover is a re-evaluation of Elvis, who was viewed as a rather camp figure, and less as a rock'n'roll icon in the 1970s. The cover may then be seen as an acknowledgement of Elvis as a rock'n'roll rebel and a precursor of punk. In this way, the image of the 50s here is quite different from the more innocent version of 50s mythology with its prom nights and diners. Instead, *the Fifties* are presented as a wild past, where rock'n'roll music was an authentic and dangerous outsider culture, despised by the establishment. This view of the Fifties nurtured a special revival of obscure 1950s music, primarily of the rockabilly variety, emerging as part of the punk scene with bands such as The Cramps and their self-appointed *psychobilly* style. The Cramps' debut single from 1978, for instance, was a

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<sup>41</sup> The Allmusic Guide album review by Stephen Thomas Erlewine (<http://www.allmusic.com/album/london-calling-mw0000189413> (accessed December 2013)).

cover of the obscure rockabilly song “The Way I Walk,” coupled with the garage/surf song “Surfin’ Bird.” The music and the extensive universe of references surrounding the band’s performances were dominated by *thrash aesthetics* and references to popular culture of the recent past, such as B-movies, tabloid journalism and erotica from the 1950s. Flyers for their concerts, for instance (Ill. 14, p. 119) reprinted anti-rock and roll propaganda from the 1950s. The Cramps were avid collectors of such material, and the band’s original drummer Miriam Linna went on to found the reissue record company Norton Records in New York with her husband Billy Miller. According to Reynolds, the couple’s home, which also serves as Norton Records’ head quarter, is “covered with framed B-movie posters, concert handbills, and other rock’n’roll memorabilia. The effect is like stepping inside [Cramps lead singer and founder] Lux Interior’s brain. Completing the period vibe there are vintage sofas and lamps, while a voluminous loft space ten feet from the floor is crammed with quaint radiograms, jukeboxes and Bakelite tube radios.” (Reynolds 2011, 300). This meticulous musealization paradoxically recalls the atmosphere of the illicit underground culture that had disappeared due to its legitimization and institutionalization. The revival of this underground Fiftiesness was motivated by an idea of authenticity and specific qualities exclusive to the period. As Lux Interior of The Cramps has said about the obscure rockabilly that the band adored:

We love it and we live it [...] but we respect it enough that I don’t think it’s something that can be done again. It is something that was once done; it came from a time and a place. You can’t take a goddamned 16-year-old kid and expect him to understand what some goddamned ignorant Southern hillbilly moonshiner cool guy knew back then 30 years ago. Cos what some guy knew back then in Tennessee is way beyond what anybody in America could enjoy today.  
(*NME* 1986, here from Reynolds 2011, p. 299.)

The past is not backward or outmoded but a bearer of essential qualities, and a vital source for an alternative culture of the present. Thus, the practice of this kind of retro culture is a hunt for the specific and authentic potential in the obscure recent past. At the same time, this functions as a counter memory to the commonly spread image of the 1950s as conformist and conservative, and the 1960s as rebellious.



Ill. 15: The B-52s: *Wild Planet*, lp-cover, Warner Brothers 1980, and “Strobe Light”, single picture sleeve, 1980.



Ill. 16: The Fifties in the Eighties: Opening from Richard Horn: *Fifties Style*, 1985.

### **The new wave ironic retro**

Besides this positive mythologizing of the 1950s, a more ironic approach to the past was also practiced in the period. This is expressed on the cover of the B-52's *Wild Planet* (1980) (Ill. 15, p. 122). The group's music contained many elements of 1950s and 1960s rock and pop, but added synthesizers and a mannered style of playing and singing create an effect of artificiality and deconstruction. The name of the group refers to two icons of 1950s culture: the B-52 bomber and the American slang term for the popular bouffant hair style also known as the Beehive (worn by two female singers of the group). Generally, the group intensively used eye-catching "populuxe props," as is the case with the *Wild Planet* cover. Instead of using an entire photo, the band is cut out and placed on a loud, red-colored background, as in an open space, parallel to the yellow background of their first album. The group are wearing kitschy costumes, and the bouffant hairdos worn by Cindy Wilson and Kate Pierson, along with lead singer Fred Schneider's moustache function as particularly eye-catching icons. In the image are also two chairs in transparent plastic (Richard Horn has identified it as the Sculptura chair from Woodward (Horn 1985, 40)) with thin legs stretched out like the antennas of a satellite. In the red cosmos a black star form in a characteristic 1950s style is also placed. These effects create a symbolic universe around the group as kitsch connoisseurs with song titles referring equally to "53 Miles West of Venus" and "Private Idaho." As the Rolling Stone review of the album said: "Fun is a void they drift through like asteroids, a vast expanse littered with cultural artifacts they keep bumping into. Gilligan's Island. Star Trek, Petula Clark. Lesley Gore, the Mashed Potato, the Supremes."<sup>42</sup> Another critic described the sound of The B-52's as being "as quaint as an Automat, as hyper-modern as the flying automobiles in the Jetsons," creating "the future from the point of view of the past that is by now totally anachronistic" (Guffey 2006, 108). Instead of viewing the past as authentic and worthy of admiration, the most artificial and incredible aspects and objects of the past are revived, like the visions of the future that are now faded and backdated. And instead of good-natured nostalgia (as displayed on the Flash Cadillac cover, for instance), the staging of Fiftiesness here is characterized by irony in the display of bad-taste kitsch objects, and even absurdity, with the shadow of the atom bomb hanging over the "fun" universe. Thus this particular retro practice is characterized by irony and the crossing of boundaries, at least those of good taste.

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<sup>42</sup> Album review by Frank Rose in Rolling Stone Magazine October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1980.  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20080212150347/http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/theb52s/albums/album/259322/review/5943590> (accessed March 2014).



In his study of the “new wave” movement in rock music at the turn of the 1980s, musicologist Theo Cateforis has characterized the B-52’s’ use of elements from the recent past as a break with the image of 1970s rock culture and its notions of authenticity (the laid-back hippie look of jeans, long hair and “authentic” influences from blues and folk rather than pop). The B-52’s choice of “marginalized, forgotten, grossly excessive and hopelessly outdated sources appealed to a smart, intellectual audience,” but like the hippie styles, it offered “an exciting alternative to the bland social conformity of the middle class” (Cateforis 2011, 122). Ultimately, the use of the “lapsed modernities of the past” made them “one of the most modern bands at the turn of the 1980s” (ibid.).

### **Retro: Drug or critique?**

As memory of the recent past started to appear as a significant tendency in the culture of the 1970s and 1980s, it generated a broad intellectual debate. A remarkable example is art critic Lucy Lippard’s essay *Hot Potatoes: Art and politics in 1980* (1981). In this evaluation of the current state of the art scene, “retrochic” is stressed and commented upon as a trend at the entrance of the new decade: “As we verge on the 1980s, ‘retrochic’ – a subtle current of content filtering through various forms – has caught up with life and focuses increasingly on sexist, heterosexist, classist and racist violence, mirroring, perhaps unwittingly, the national economic backlash” (Lippard 1996, 12). Examples of this *retrochic* trend provided by Lippard include “an exhibition of abstract drawings by a first-name-only white artist graciously titled “The Nigger Drawings” [...] a male Canadian rock group called Battered Wives [...] or a beautifully executed and minutely detailed ‘photorealist’ painting called The Sewing Room dedicated to some poor soul called Barbara, which depicts a pretty middle-class sitting room in which a workclothed man gorily stabs the lady of the house in the neck” (Lippard 1996, 12).<sup>43</sup>

These controversial references to the racism and sexism of the past are “an acatatic but dangerous drug” that Lippard hopes will “not be the banner of the 1980s” (Lippard 1996, 13), since this revival, however ironic it might be, reproduces “sexist, heterosexist, classist and racist violence” and produces “retrograde fascist art” (Lippard 1996, 12). According to Lippard, the 1950s

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<sup>43</sup> “The Nigger Drawings” was a show in the Artists Space in New York in 1979 by artist Donald Newman, The Battered Wives was a Canadian punk rock group who released two albums in 1978 and 1979 ([http://jam.canoe.ca/Music/Pop\\_Encyclopedia/B/Battered\\_Wives.html](http://jam.canoe.ca/Music/Pop_Encyclopedia/B/Battered_Wives.html)), but the painting cannot be identified.

ought not to be revived, but should rather be remembered as “very bad days for blacks, unions, women (viz. the crippling and deforming fashions like the stiletto heels, long tight skirts and vampire make-up) and for anyone McCarthy cast his bleary eye upon” (Lippard 1996, 13). Unlike the postmodernist thoughts of the “lost referential” of history described by Baudrillard, Lippard’s *retrochic* is always attached to its historical referent. Like the *mode retro*, it is based on a transgression of taboos and moral borders. In this way, Lippard’s retrochic art does not entirely correspond with the normal conception of retro as a more restrained aesthetic.

Lippard’s dissociation with *retrochic* is similar to Fredric Jameson’s critique of postmodern culture. As mentioned earlier, Jameson saw a weakening of historicity and the rise of a “new depthlessness” in the contemporary cultural landscape including retro fashions and the “cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” in the “blank parody” of postmodern pastiche (Jameson 1984). Like Lippard, Jameson’s view is that “a history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos.” To oppose this deterministic view of retro, it should be added that retro *is* in some sense a history lesson. It examines a specific era and adds new aspects to the collective memory of it. In this way, it discusses the past and its values in the present, often with a critical awareness, and rarely with a regressive adaption of the values and ideologies of the past.

Retrochic *did* become some kind of a banner for the 1980s. This is expressed in Richard Horn’s *Fifties Style* (1985), an illustrated design book gathering historical 1950s material with contemporary fifties inspired design (Ill. 16, p. 122). “It is the eighties, but we live the fifties again,” Horn states as 1980s culture from record covers to architecture “appropriate fifties motifs, swiftly translating them into an eighties sensibility” (Horn 1985: 12). This translation is aware of the difference, as the “bright warm colors and jumble of typefaces would never be taken for fifties originals. They are too exaggerated, too campy. As such, they reflect the same contemporary sensibility that favors recycled teen fashions – a sensibility that both ridicules and enjoys the ridiculousness of naively optimistic, consumer-crazed postwar America.” (Horn 1985: 58). Horn suggests that the ironic revival has a critical edge in relation to both the naïve optimism of the 1950s and the contemporary: “[W]earing fifties or fifties style clothes in the eighties can be interpreted as a kind of social protest in and of itself. To do so is to make a statement, one that mocks [...] the values of the fifties, and to a certain extent those of the Eighties that America holds so dear” (Horn 1985, 165).

The presidency of Ronald Reagan, starting in 1980, was easily identified with nostalgia and returning to values of the past with slogans like “New politics of old values.” 1950s

movie star Reagan could be seen on the screen in the growth of rerun-based “nostalgia-tv.” In 1985 a whole cable channel, The Nostalgia Network, was founded, broadcasting 1950s movies and TV-series with the slogan “A unique blend of non-violent feel-good programming with traditional values” (Grainge 2000, 29). The neo-conservative rising with the rhetoric of “Are the Good Times Really Over” (as Merle Haggard sang in 1982), and the incitement to undo the disturbing modernity of the 1960s and 1970s formed the kind of nostalgia Svetlana Boym has described as *restorative nostalgia*: a dedicated belief in the restoration of the truths of the (pre-modern) past (Boym 2001, 41). The retro-investigation in the 1950s could, however, be seen in terms of Boym’s other nostalgia archetype, *reflexive nostalgia*, which is engaged in a critical longing aware of the impossibility of going back, in an often ironic and humoristic way (Boym 2001, 49). The cultural landscape witnessed a cultural war over the past, and this past was used simultaneously as a conflict-less truth that should be reestablished and as a conflict-filled package of materials from the past that could be used aesthetically in the present. Here, retro was a way of reinterpreting the thing-world of the 1950s. Not as a celebration of conservative values, and not as a promise of a fantastic future, but as a critical, self-aware positioning in an alternative culture.

## Musealizing Fiftiesness

Besides this discussion of the meaning of the past, a growing *musealization* of popular- and everyday culture of the 1950s started in the 1980s. For example, a new interest in the previously disdained modern heritage from the 1950s is visible in a wave of books from the mid-1980s, such as Chester Leibs’ *Main Street To Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), Philip Langdon’s *Orange Roofs, Golden Arches: The Architecture of American Chain Restaurant* (Alfred H. Barr, 1986), Sam Hall Kaplan’s *L.A. Lost and Found. An Architectural History of Los Angeles* (Crown Publishers Inc., 1987), Karal Ann Marling’s *The Collossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Cherie and Kenneth Fehrman’s *Postwar Interior Design: 1945-1960* (Reinhold, 1987), and Stephen Bayley’s *Harley Earl and the Dream Machine* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1983). This wave of books was arguably inspired by the architectural manifesto *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977) by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour. Postmodernism, which “main avatar” has often been identified as architecture (Adamson and Pavitt 2011, 13), had the use of

historical styles as a main characteristic. This was famously expressed at the architecture biennale in Venice 1980, which carried the title *The Presence of the Past* and featured a programme of pluralism and historical references, obviously challenging the modernist purism of style. But instead of this postmodern critique of high modernism, the above mentioned books all focused dedicatedly on the previously dismissed popular architecture and design of the recent past. Richly illustrated, they fall somewhere in between the popular and the scholarly categories, and combine the historical, the aesthetic, and the entertaining with a retro sensibility of irony and nostalgia. The two most important of these books have even created their own stylistic terms for their objects, as Alan Hess' *Googie* and Thomas Hine's *Populuxe* are often encountered in the retro worlds as descriptions of the desired Fiftiesness.

### **Googie: The recognition of the ultramodern roadside architecture**

Architect Alan Hess' *Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture* (1986) (Ill. 17, p. 128) is an illustrated introduction to the architecture of drive-in restaurants, drive-in markets, car washes and motels from the post-war decades, and to the future-oriented functionality of this architecture of "populism and technology." Hess describes an experience in the present of the neglect and disappearance of the futuristic aspirations of ultramodern roadside architecture. "The future ended on September 20, 1984. They closed down Ship's coffee shop at midnight and the bulldozers came in the morning" (Hess 2004, 22). Those are the book's introductory words, and Hess frames his subject by stating the following: "Around 1970, commercial architects gave up building the future and began to build the past again. In place of shimmering stainless steel, primary colors, and acres of glass came wide eaves, wood beams, hipped roofs, and plastic stained-glass chandeliers. Interiors mutated from plastic and steel futuramas into Tiffany-glass men's clubs" (Hess 2004, 178). Once again, the present futures became present pasts.

The term "Googie" stems from one of the coffee shops that the book is dedicated to: Googie's Coffee Shop, built by architect John Lautner in 1949 at Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles. Hess' dedicated tribute to disregarded pop-architecture has as its incentive an ironic nostalgia of the forward-looking past: "The modern shapes of the car-oriented lifestyle of these and other buildings I saw as a child vividly suggested that the future was getting closer every day. The House of the Future at Disneyland was a wonder, bright with curving walls and thousands of neat gadgets popping out of walls or rising from counters. I was ready to move in." (Hess 1986, 16). The memories are embedded in the very materiality of this epoch, and the ultramodern roadside



architecture can be read as *lieux de mémoires* (Nora 1989) of a collective memory: “I remember sun glinting off chrome and windshield through expanses of the glass window. Everything shimmered in the brilliant light that poured over the banana trees, Mercurys, and stucco walls of Southern California” (ibid). The 1950s “Googie” architecture is taken from the dismissed and history-less category of kitsch, and documented as a historical style with a distinct aesthetic. Hess’ book is thus a source for retro, investing connoisseurship into the formerly aesthetically non-digestible.

As Hess notices in the preface to the 2004 edition of the book, Googie architecture has become relevant again: “Since the first edition of *Googie* was published in 1985, both the style and the term have been revived, usually with less pejorative undertones than it had in the 1950s. The style has become a cultural reference in its own right; Googie coffee shops and bowling alleys have been used as settings in cutting-edge popular movies and television shows (*Pulp Fiction*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Mulholland Drive*, *The Simpsons*)” (Hess, 2004, 19). The term “googie” is also frequently used to authenticate period pieces for sale at markets such as eBay, and there are several homepages dedicated to googie style, such as Googie Architecture Online (<http://www.spaceagecity.com/googie/>). The Googie style has also received official recognition through the work of the Los Angeles Conservancy Modern Committee ([www.modcom](http://www.modcom.com)), which works for the conservation of post-1945 architecture. This expresses the general recognition of a retro field such as the googie style and its inclusion in the established cultural debate and policies.

### **Populuxe: Remembering the popular luxury of the 1950s**

Communicating a common past through 1950s material culture is also the aim of Thomas Hine’s *Populuxe: The look and life of America in the ‘50s and ‘60s, from tailfins and TV dinners to Barbie dolls and fallout shelters* (1986) (Ill. 18, p. 128). “Populuxe” is a metonymic neologism that means popular luxury, and which mimes the synthetic words typically created in the early consumer society to name products of the new *thing*-world:

It derives, of course, from populism and popularity, with just a fleeting allusion to pop art, which took Populuxe imagery and attitudes as a subject matter. And it has luxury, popular luxury, luxury for all. This may be a contradiction in terms, but it is an expression of the spirit of the time and the rationale for many of the products that were produced. And, finally, Populuxe contains a thoroughly unnecessary “e” to give it

class.

(Hine, 1986, p. 6).

Hine focuses on various spheres of the material culture of the “Populuxe era” from 1954 to 1964, such as car design, household appliances, and hotel architecture, and the symbolisms and styles promoted for living in the “new frontier” of the suburb, such as boomerang shapes and space age imagery. In this, the term is based on the recognition of a specific material culture: “Populuxe is about the material objects of this highly materialistic age. Things were not only more common and more available than before, they were also invested with greater meaning.” (Hine 1986, 4). Being an architect, Alan Hess’s primary focus is on the Googie buildings themselves and what is left of them today. Thomas Hine’s perspective on cultural history is somewhat wider and has the ability to shift back and forth between objects and ideas. According to Hine, the starting point of the Populuxe era may be set at 1954 – the year which “brought not only the downfall of McCarthy and the momentous Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated schools but also the introduction of sleek, powerful and finny low-priced cars and the emergence of a sexy, urgent new kind of popular music – rock and roll” (Hine 1986, 11). After the more subdued first decade after WWII, the Populuxe era “presented an invitation to indulge in the luxuries” and “enjoy the fruits of American affluence” (Ibid.). The era was characterized by a rhetoric of progress and optimism: “Never before, so much for so few” as an article in *Life* said in 1954, (Hine 1986, 15) referring to the possibilities of the small 1930s generation before the even more prosperous babyboomer generation. Often, such statements about the available affluence were complemented by visions of an even brighter future. The era can then obviously be seen as dominated by ideas of “present futures,” as described by Huyssen (see Chapter 3).

Hine argues that these ideas started to change in the mid-1960s as the Populuxe imagery began to appear naïve and empty, as “Americans seemed to be getting a bit jaded about the future; it had been around for too long a time” (Hine 1986, 168). The 1964 New York World’s Fair, for instance, which “should have been a Populuxe extravaganza” (Hine 1986, 167) was “clearly not the kind of overwhelming enthusiasm into the future that might have been found only a few years before [...] While the 1939 World’s Fair had helped shape American culture, the 1964 fair was largely familiar, and was seen as, at most, a pleasant diversion.” (Hine 1986, 168).

By this distinction Hine frames the era associated with *Fiftiesness*. As a cultural onomatopoeia, the term Populuxe has provided a definition of the era’s self-image and identity for

posterity. Hine's book, like Hess' *Googie*, is also in itself an example of the 1980s interest in American popular culture and design of the '50s as described by Richard Horn. The aim of both books is to express a collective experience and an important cultural historical moment (Hine: "a crucial moment in American history;" Hess: "a sublime, deep-running current of American desire and design") by looking at neglected material that had not been the object of study before. The perception of the past expressed is one of simultaneous connection and distance to the authors' contemporary time. According to Hine, the historical moment of Populuxe "determined the environment in which we live today, but many of those attitudes seem distant, enigmatic and even quaint" (Hine 1986, 4). This experience of the difference of the recent past calls for contrasting reactions: "Today we are inclined to marvel at the naïvete of the period or feel nausea at its overindulgence. Still, we cannot help seeing it all around us. It has made it into contemporary art, into New Wave style, into restaurants and rock videos and even into antique stores" (ibid.), says Hine, pointing to retro culture, which has adopted his *Populuxe* term for its vocabulary alongside *Googie*, to be used when dealing with the retro *heartland* material of 1950s pop modern.

With their entertaining and aesthetic approach to the historical material and the devoted study of previously unadorned material such as gas stations and Tupperware, Hine and Hess' books can be seen as cases of the *musealization* described by Lübbe and Huyssen in the previous chapter. The term describes the way in which the logics and characteristics of the museum are increasingly spreading from the museum to all areas of everyday life in modern mass culture. Our coffee shops today, for instance, are not designed to be aggressively modern as in the age of Googie style, but are filled with old objects and an awareness of style, where characteristics of different periods are carefully put together. Also, as Simon Reynolds describes in *Retromania* (2011) (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 7), contemporary pop culture too has become obsessed with its own past and characterized by the historicizing practices of collecting and curating.

As noted, Lübbe argues that musealization is a reaction to the rapid changes of modern culture creating a cultural bulwark. The books *Googie* and *Populuxe* are not necessarily bulwarks as much as reflections on the fast-changing modern culture and its popular belief in the future. As such, they should arguably be seen as manifestations of the reflexive nostalgia described by Boym (see Chapter 1), not expressing a wish to restore the past or go back to a Golden Age, but to recognize it and reflect upon its differences from the present. The books are also relevant in the perspective of cultural memory, since they formulate a shared past based on generally experienced, but formerly unrecognized material.



Incidentally, it should be noted that the Smithsonian Institution, as a literal musealization of the “present futures,” launched the exhibition *Yesterday’s Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future* in 1984, which has toured until recently<sup>44</sup> and is was accompanied by a book of the same name. The confident visualization of the future of the 1950s has become a museum object, often as a sign of the collectively remembered 1950s and their status as modern past.



III.19: “Yesterday’s Tomorrows” book and exhibition.

### **The Fifties as cultic Other: The Incredibly Strange 1950s**

Had the pop-cultural revival of the 1950s in the 1970s stood alone, it could have been seen as a casual fad, or, a more conventionally nostalgic looking back at a specific generation. The further aesthetic exploration of the 1950s in the following decades, however, with retro as a distinct feature of the alternative culture, expressed an intensive interest in the recent past, combining aesthetic sensibility with historicizing knowledge. This exploration made use of 1950s style, but also mapped its history with an even deeper fascination with Fiftiesness than the 1970s nostalgia-wave. Compared to the two ‘70s-variants of retro – authenticity based retro and carnivalesque retro – this more fully developed type of retro adds a layer of knowledge and connoisseurship, and expresses a more self-aware aesthetic positioning.

This type of retro as an emblem of alternative culture was practiced in *cults* often dedicated to particular aspects of the recent past and 1950s culture. One example is the lounge

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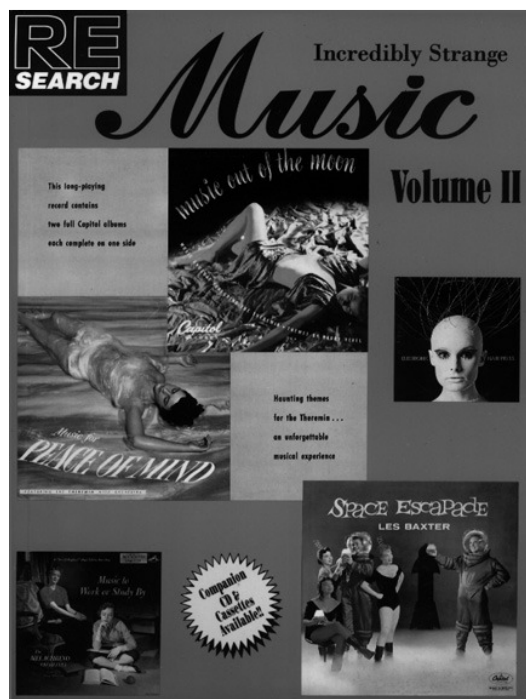
<sup>44</sup> <http://www.museumonmainstreet.org/yesterdaysTomorrows/index.html> (accessed January 2014).

music revival of the early 1990s, which reintroduced the abandoned territory of easy listening and mood music as a new club scene and a record collector subculture. The lounge revival (lounge was a new genre term, not used in the 1950s and 1960s) included still-remembered stars like Dean Martin and Burt Bacharach, as well as rediscovered cult names such as (Juan García) Esquivel and Yma Sumac, reintroduced under labels such as “cocktail generation, cocktail nation, lounge music, grounge, loungecore, neo-easy listening, jet-set, exotica, space age pop, incredibly strange music” (Adinolfi 2008, 17). This was of course a radical reinterpretation of material “long considered to have been laid to rest during the 1950s and 1960s, music that was once the exclusive domain of mothers and fathers, of adults in general, utterly inappropriate for youths” (ibid.), as Francesco Adinolfi writes in his book *Mondo Exotica*, on lounge music and its revival. Even though this music had been popular (but banal) in the Populuxe era, it was later actively forgotten and unincorporated in any canonization. In the liner notes from a reissue of exotica artist Les Baxter, R. J. Smith asks: “Could our parents really have been this weird? If Baxter’s oeuvre was wildly commercial then, now it seems wildly experimental. This was the mainstream that time forgot” (Adinolfi 2008, 22).

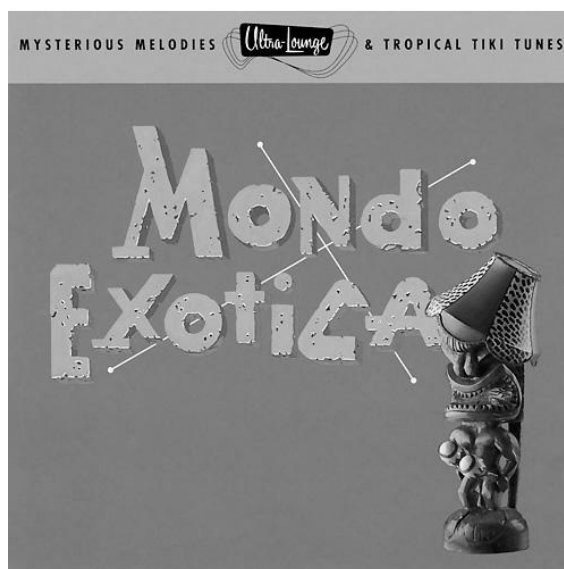
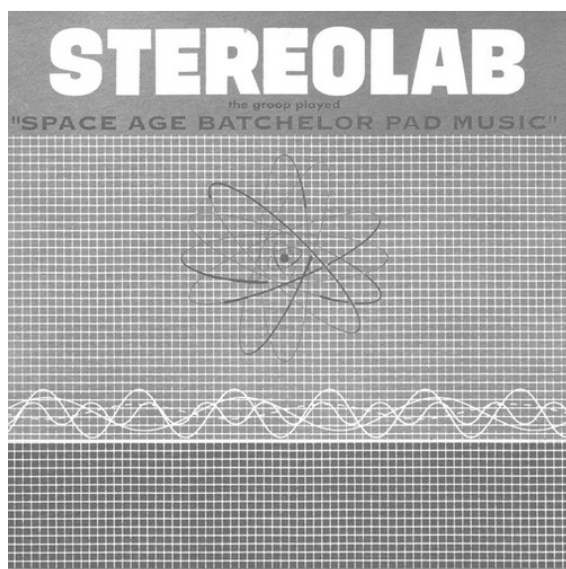
The first traces of this transgressive revival are found in independent underground initiatives such as the *Incredibly Strange Music* (1993) (Ill. 21, p. 134) volumes of books and mix tapes from RE/SEARCH, a manifestly countercultural publisher with roots in the punk scene (founded as the punk magazine *Search and Destroy* in 1977), dedicated to alternative culture such as beat literature and science fiction, and phenomena such as urban primitivism and industrial music.<sup>45</sup> In his analysis of RE/SEARCH, John Sears defines “incredibly strange music” as “music that is difficult to find in geographical terms, hard to locate in conventionally generic terms, and problematic in terms of taste and expertise” (Sears 2011, 130). Contrary to its original status as commercial mainstream music, it now (in 1993) seemed to achieve an aura of market resistance, since it had long been out of commercial circulation, which the alternative imperative of RE/SEARCH uncovered. Sears characterizes the rhetoric of “unknown territory” and the strange otherness attributed to *Incredibly Strange Music* as reminiscent of avant-garde aesthetics and practices such as the surrealist object, which, according to André Breton, should “seem odd, bizarre, meaningless and ludicrous to the uninitiated,” (Sears 2011, 129) and which were often found among outdated objects in flea markets. Also, Deleuze and Guattari’s terms *deterritorialization* and *reterritorialization* were taken into account by Sears, meaning to redo what has been undone: since

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.researchpubs.com/Blog/about/> (accessed January 2014).



III. 20: *Incredibly Strange Music* # 1 and # 2. RE-Search Magazine 1993. RE-Search Publications.



III. 21: Stereolab: *The Groop Played "Space Age Batchelor Pad Music"*, Too Pure Records 1993, and *Ultra Lounge* # 1: *Mondo Exotica*, Capitol Records 1996.

lounge music has been critically neglected and left unhistoricized, it has become an unfamiliar and unknown territory, appearing as “incredibly strange” and suitable for a reterritorialization as hip counterculture.

Lounge and its associated universe became a popular reference in 1990s culture. In contemporary music this spanned from experimental indie groups like Stereolab (who issued an album called *The Groop Played “Space Age Bachelor Pad Music”* (1993) (Ill. 21, p. 134)) to mainstream gimmick hits like The Mike Flowers Pops. The established music business now found their archives of original lounge music sellable again and issued compilations of the likes of Martin Denny and Les Baxter. Capitol/EMI also issued the *Ultra Lounge* multi-volume series (1996), with thematized volumes such as “Mambo Fever” and “Organs in Orbit.” A number of movies such as *Swingers* (1996), *Four Rooms* (1995) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) also suddenly used lounge as a stylistic component. The lounge revival was an important part of 1990s culture, involving both the mainstream cultural forms such as movies and chart hits, as well as the underground level of cult phenomena and alternative forums.

The lounge revival even had subgenres like *Tiki*, the cult of Polynesian-themed restaurants and bars of the postwar-decades. The long decaying Tiki-places from the 1950s in North America were suddenly applauded as valuable heritage, and new places opened (and still do) in their image. Also, Tiki was soon profoundly musealized in Sven Kirsten’s *Book of Tiki* (2000), which provided Tiki’s historical background and stylistic history.

As Sears recognizes, the lounge revival was primarily an exploration of American popular culture and exoticism. But soon the specialization of retro also turned towards the “imagined past of others” such as “French pop, German hippies, Brazilian Tropicalia, Japanese imitations of all the above,” necessarily misunderstood and accented, as described in a 1999 article in the New York Observer.<sup>46</sup> This tendency has continued in the new millennium with an extensive cultivation of special versions of modern pop culture, with compilations of Indonesian psychedelic rock or Eastern Block funk<sup>47</sup> finding audiences. In such cases, the retro exploration of the past challenges the expected version of the past, responding to nuances and the vernacular dialects of modern culture, even though there might also be an element of proper exoticism and cult rarity involved. It should be stated that these are not examples of the pastiches and the mixing of styles of

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<sup>46</sup> D. Strauss: “I Have Seen the Future of Rock, and It’s ... A Shrubbery,” The New York Observer, January 25, 1999, 42.

<sup>47</sup> For example: *Those Shocking, Shaking Days: Indonesian Hard, Psychedelic, Progressive Rock and Funk 1970-1978*, Now Again (2011), *Eastern Block Funk Experience*, Nascente (2012)

postmodernism. They do actually involve an interest in historical and cultural contexts and, not least, the presence of real artefacts and an interest in their authenticity. I will comment further upon these *accents of retro* in the case studies of the following chapters.

The lounge and exotica revival recalls a forgotten and underappreciated 1950s culture staged as exotic other, “a hidden world of plastic where exotic easy listening, modern primitives, suburban astronauts, Bavarian sex symbols and singing psychics co-exists in fabulous Living Stereo,”<sup>48</sup> as an essay in *The Wire* described the *Incredibly Strange* series. This is different in kind from the 1950s than the rock’n’roll and teenage-oriented one revived in the 1970s. It involves an even more radical recontextualization than the “folk devils” of the original greasers, who were turned into good-natured nostalgia, and it may thus be understood as a further developed and specialized form of retro. The reterritorialization of previously dismissed cultural objects like 1950s exotica records could be seen as an example of the movement of artefacts from the archive into the canon, to use Aleida Assmann’s concepts. In this way, it redraws the image of the past and how it is remembered. This alternative history is arguably reflexive and aware of paradoxes and ambivalences such as the popularity of exotic kitsch in newly-built suburbs and in the search for new, undiscovered material. It is, however, also a fan- and trend-based approach to history, based on self-serving, blindly selective and vague theories, with intertwined incentives of the aesthetic, the historical and the entertaining.

## **The digital Yesterland: The Fifties in the 21st century**

The lounge revival shows the movement from discovery in underground culture to general recognition and popularity. It also shows the specialization as well as popularity of retro. Both of these tendencies have continued into the 21st century, where they have expanded, as the practice of retro has become generally available, beyond the spheres of youth- and subcultures where it was developed in the previous decades. Especially in the last decade retro culture, with a focus on the 1950s, has been recognized as ubiquitous, materially accessible through an extensive retro industry spanning from exclusive connoisseur pieces to colorful and cheap accessories, and accessible on the

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<sup>48</sup> David Toop: “Kitsch of Distinction,” *The Wire* 128 (October 1994).

internet – an endless resource of materials from the past contributing considerably to the *retromania* of current popular culture (Reynolds 2011).

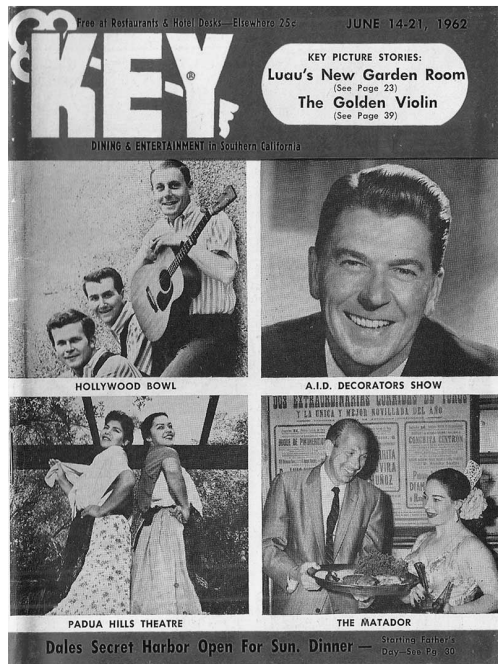
Digitalization has obviously been a stimulating factor for the interest in the recent past and the popularization of retro. “On the internet, the past and present commingle in a way that makes time itself mushy and spongiform” Reynolds states (Reynolds 2011, 63), with all kinds of past matter not only available for special-interest devotees in collections far from everyday-life, but at the disposal of anyone who cares to obtain it.

Apart from the casual ‘anarchive’ of YouTube, the internet has fostered many curated presentations of retro materials, including web-pages, blogs and forums dedicated to the cultivation of the recent past. One of the most comprehensive is created by author and columnist James Lileks ([www.lileks.com](http://www.lileks.com)), providing commented displays of materials such as comics, cookbooks (*The Gallery of Regrettable Food*), diner postcards and pictures of specific urban areas in the recent past. The presentation is equally dedicated and ironic, emphasizing both the otherness of the past and our recognition and fascination with it. A typical introduction goes like this:

“The following is a complete account of every single page in the June 14-21, 1962 Key guide to dining and entertainment in Southern California. It’s a different era - men smoked and drank Chivas, restaurants had plastic vines and straw-covered bottles, beef was King, and you snapped your fingers to music instead of waving your head up and down. You can hear the nylons go skrrr-skrrr-skrrr, the click of heels on tile; you can smell the hairspray and the Old Spice. It’s a world any of us could enter and understand right away. But sometimes it seems as distant as Rome.”

(James Lileks, <http://www.lileks.com/misc/key62/index.html> (accessed January 2014)).

The materiality and *thingness* is emphasized in this remembrance of the recent past. From a simple and ordinary source – the black-and-white Key pamphlet guide (Ill. 22, p. 138) – a vivid picture is drawn of the era, not just of the objects but also of sensory impressions like smells and sounds, and bodily practices and social behavior. Thus, the use of the past is highly based on *presence*, even with the ironic tone and the pointing out of distance from the present. Accordingly, the incentive is not a meaning-based study of history or an official, representational use of the past, but an entertainment-based and independent musealization.



Ill. 22: The Key Guide to L.A., 1962, from Lileks.com, and front page from site. Images: Lileks.com



Ill. 23: “House of the Future” in Tomorrowland from 1958, from Yesterland.com.



Ill. 24: “Permanent Press” digital filter from Misterretro.com.

Other such digital *musealizations*, also uniting the historical with the aesthetic and the entertaining, include the site Yesterland ([www.yesterland.com](http://www.yesterland.com)). Yesterland is presented as “A theme park on the web featuring discontinued Disneyland attractions,” through photos and research from users as well as the site’s creators. The creator of the site, Werner Weiss, presents himself as “Curator of Yesterland” to emphasize the museum character of this unofficial “online museum,” which is not associated with the Walt Disney Company or any other organization. The site features a prominent section on *Tomorrowland*, a part of the original Disneyland themed around the future. This pop-futuristic icon of the 1950s, with its monorail and its House of Tomorrow which presented “the world of 1987” in 1955, has since downplayed its futurism. For example, the Disneyland Park in Paris, which opened in the 1990s, has a similar area called Discoveryland, dominated by Jules Verne-inspired visions of the future.<sup>49</sup> With participation from retro cultists as well as sincere nostalgists, the site Yesterland is a perfect monument and *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989) for the digital memory of the 1950s, which embrace the techno-futurism of the 1950s with digital nostalgia.

As an alternative to such time consuming websites, web-based retro today also takes place on quicker formats like the Facebook communities *Retronaut* and *Weird Retro*, which offer a daily retro picture to their subscribers. These non-official, self-organized activities use the internet’s easy access to images and other medial representations, but must of course stick to virtuality as they cannot offer the materiality of the objects or the presence of events. The interest in retro materiality in digital formats has been very profound. For example, a webpage with the expressive name *Mister Retro* ([www.misterretro.com](http://www.misterretro.com)) sells digital image processing effects which imitate the color reproduction and resolution of badly printed old color CMYK prints, or the look of a washed-out t-shirt print with the promise of “*an authentic pop of realism and a genuine tactile feel.*”<sup>50</sup> (Ill. 24, p. 138) A font imitating the materiality of a traditional typewriter’s output has also been distributed as *Mom’s Typewriter* (2005), available from a couple of sources.<sup>51</sup> And the image processing program and social medium Instagram (2010-) has become a widespread success with its quadratic formats imitating the popular Polaroid instant photos. A similar effect is created with the Hipstamatic application for camera phones, which imitate the retro look of instant camera photos with the slogan “Digital photography never looked so analog.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomorrowland> (accessed January 2014).

<sup>50</sup> [http://www.misterretro.com/permanent\\_press\\_filters.html](http://www.misterretro.com/permanent_press_filters.html) (accessed January 2014).

<sup>51</sup> For example available from <http://www.fontsquirrel.com/fonts/MomsTypewriter> (accessed January 2014).

<sup>52</sup> <http://hipstamatic.com/classic/> (accessed January 2014).



A more specialized example of the digital distribution of analogue aesthetics is the cult of Lomography: photos taken with the Soviet-produced Lomo Kompakt Automat camera from the 1980s. A group of Viennese students discovered the camera and its distinct retro character in the early 1990s, and have since formed The Lomographic Society as a forum for exhibitions, competitions and events concerning the world-wide use of “Lomography.” Especially through online distribution, Lomography has caught on, and the website functions as a community for this dogmatically analogue photography. The society has set up “Ten Golden Rules” of Lomography, elaborating on the original “don’t think, just shoot” motto of the camera. These include taking the camera everywhere you go, shoot from the hip, and enjoy the unpredictability of the output pictures.<sup>53</sup> In this way, Lomography draws upon the spontaneous snapshot aesthetics of depicting reality, but includes the interference and the materiality of the technology, contrary to the idea of transparency attached to the snapshot image. The “don’t think, just shoot” practice can be seen as a “presence effect” (Gumbrecht) but is of course also a conscious aesthetic choice.

This combination of a longing for immediacy and the knowing consciousness of the practice and its means can be seen to express the oft-quoted theory of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin about *remediation* and its double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). It is Bolter and Grusin’s assumption that new media such as the websites and browsers of the World Wide Web are not the beginning of mediation. They rather build upon previous mediations such as perspective drawing, photography and film; accordingly, culture is always characterized by a process of remediation. This remediation contains two tendencies which make up the “double logic of remediation.” The first is the wish for *immediacy* and transparency to the reality represented in the media. The other is the *hypermediacy* which makes the media and the use of them visible. Immediacy aims at an *experience of reality* while hypermediacy aims at an *experience of the medium*. Thus, immediacy will make the past come alive, while hypermediacy will point to how the image of the past is transmitted, and how it is tied to the present. The two tendencies have varied throughout history, but both are strongly present in the current new media boom. Here, “[o]ur culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 5).

Retro medializations such as Instagram and Lomography contain this doubleness. They also express an experience of authenticity in the media objects and aesthetics of the recent

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.lomography.com/about/the-ten-golden-rules> (accessed January 2014).

past. Even though it can be described through these processes of remediation, retro should not be seen as identical with remediation. Remediation describes the implicit way in which new technology and its aesthetics build upon previous technologies and their shaping of the represented content. Retro, however, is of course a deliberate contrasting of the media experience of the present and the past, and also includes dead ends and discontinuities: that which was not built upon and remediated.

### **Material mobilizations of Fiftiesness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Coinciding with digital retro, literal materializations of the recent past are pursued more and more often and on a bigger and more profound scale. I will describe some of these materializations in contemporary cultural expression through the example of music and cover art, the way things are produced and distributed in the contemporary “retro market,” and finally, the *retro festival* as the big event-making of retro, bringing all of its elements and components together. Again, I will focus on the 1950s as the primary object of retro culture, as these examples will illustrate the popularity of Fiftiesness. Current retro culture shows a materialization of the Fifties, and a simultaneous dedication to the revival and availability of it, as the following examples will make clear.

As examples of contemporary cultural expression, I have chosen two rock-pop records, focusing on their cover art and material appearance. These are the albums *Lonesome Road* (2013) by the Canadian artist Bloodshot Bill and the album *Smoking in Heaven* (2011) by the British trio Kitty, Daisy and Lewis.

Bloodshot Bill of Montreal, Canada is an integrated part of the North-American rockabilly revival and its festivals such as the Viva Las Vegas Rockabilly Weekender and the Red, Hot and Blue Rockabilly Festival, which is further described in Chapter 5. Bloodshot Bill performs as a one-man band (he simultaneously plays guitar, drums and sings) and in various collaborations with a basis in rockabilly and other 1950s styles. As described by a journalist, his music and appearance “ [...] easily associate with the record player era, with old 45's, big greasy hairdos, black-and-white films, soda shops, pinup girls, smoky barrooms with Wurlitzer jukeboxes, pop art, hollow-body electric guitars, beat-up Converse sneakers hanging by their laces from telephone wires, and a great many other things.”<sup>54</sup> Bill appears with greaser hair (he has even made his own

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<sup>54</sup> James G. Carlson at Pluginmusic.com, April 2010, <http://www.pluginmusic.com/features.php?page=bloodshotbill> (accessed January 2014).

hair wax as a merchandise product) and other Fiftiesness attributes, which contributes to the retro myth around his performance. Bloodshot Bill releases his records, often as vinyl-only and in the retro formats of singles and EPs, on the New York-based record company Norton Records. As mentioned before, Norton Records is an emblem of the cult representation of the 1950s, issuing authentic material from the 1950s as well as decidedly retro oriented productions like Bloodshot Bill.

Bill's newest release, the LP *The Lonesome Road* (Norton Records 2013) (Ill. 25, p. 144) appears with a cover of perfected 1950s retro, materialized in the details as well as the whole object. The artist is clad in way typically of the period and is surrounded by layout and graphical effects taken from an authentic 1950s cover. This aesthetic whole includes the monochrome tone of the cover and rhetoric such as "Popular songs and other favourites – sung by the world-famous Bloodshot Bill – accompanying himself on guitar." Contrary to previous examples of 1950s-citing covers such as The B-52's and The Clash, the cover not only contains a few references or props, but the album is a thorough *materialization* of the 1950s, and a seemingly loyal identification with the era. It is not the most obvious and generally recognized icons of Fiftiesness that the cover makes use of. No *Grease*-like clichés, kitsch ironies, or, "incredibly strange" Otherness. Instead, the Fiftiesness is created through downplayed and congenial elements such as the typography (containing as much as six distinct fonts), the drawn cloud and the V-neck sweater and shirt worn by Bill. The cover presents itself not so much as a rock'n'roll record, but rather as a country, blues, or, entertainment music cover from the era. Bloodshot Bill is not just "rock'n'roll," but something even more authentic and rooted. This also goes for the posture of the artist, which is not a reckless gesture of rock'n'roll rebellion as, for example, the instrument destruction of The Clash on the *London Calling* cover, but instead a knowing and loyal reproduction of the bodily conventions of the 1950s. Also, the style of photography with its melodramatic lightning is a marker of Fiftiesness. All these contribute to make the album look like an actual 1950s artefact. Not as caricature or political meaning (as would be, historically, with the reference to Antiquity in Classicism). Instead, the dedicated materialization of the 1950s is the rallying point for a subculture tied together of a symbolic universe of 1950s-referring material objects, symbols and practices. This is not a counter culture opposed to the rest of the society, or socially marginal like the original 1950s greasers, but is rather a way to establish presence through the work and doings of material things.

Compared to the traditional role of subculture based on subversion and oppositional positioning, as described by the Birmingham School, Bloodshot Bill and the rockabilly revival is

more adapted to society and cultural hierarchies, and only stages rebel images of the past. It is not a “youth culture,” as its performers and fans spread through all ages (Bill has performed since the 1990s). Retro is, however, also intensely performed by younger artists, as the next example shows.

### **Kitty Daisy and Lewis**

While Bloodshot Bill is an insider in the rockabilly subculture and has his popularity at an underground level far from chart and media attention, Kitty, Daisy and Lewis are examples of the broader popularity of the retro style. The young sibling trio (they were only 12, 14 and 16 when they released their debut single “Honolulu Rock”) have toured with popular artists like Coldplay, performed at festivals like Glastonbury, and have allegedly been adored by celebrities like Amy Winehouse, David Lynch and Ewan McGregor. Their music contains many obvious and ear-catching elements of Fiftiesness through styles such as rockabilly, country-blues, swing and Hawaii-music, and the music magazine NME introduced the band as “The sound of yesteryear, but also a band for the future.” Retro also dominates the visual image of the band, as the group always appears in a mythologized 1950s style (“a figure-hugging sailor-girl outfit for Daisy; billowy and high-waisted suit and braces for Lewis; buttoned-to-the-neck checked shirt and fishnet tights under shorts for Kitty”<sup>55</sup>) and performs with vintage instruments and recording technology.

The records of Kitty, Daisy and Lewis also refer intensively to the past. Their debut album *A-Z of Kitty, Daisy & Lewis: The Roots Of Rock 'n' Roll* (2007) included cover versions of 1950s songs and styles consciously announced as “Boogie-woogie, R ’n’ B-Western Swing, Jump-Blues, Swing, Jazz, Rockabilly, Blues, Country and Western.” All of their releases starting with the breakthrough single “Mean Son of a Gun” (Sunday Best, 2007) are available in vinyl versions with very Fifties styled covers. Like the covers of Bloodshot Bill, these are graphically perfected: they do not just contain some 1950s references, but appears as authentic wholesome (even if perfected) artifacts from the past. The album *Smoking in Heaven* (Sunday Best 2011) (Ill. 26, p. 144) has even been released in a special edition as an album of 78 rpm/10 inch records – the format from before the introduction of the vinyl long-player in 1948. The album (this term origins from this format which because of the short playing time was issued as an album of several discs) contains ten 78 rpm records, pressed on vintage equipment by the band itself. This is of course a radical retro gesture which invests a lot of effort and resources to realize the work in the materiality and

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<sup>55</sup> Craig McLean: “Kitty, Daisy and Lewis: Quiff of Nostalgia,” The Telegraph, 12.7. 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3556341/Kitty-Daisy-and-Lewis-quiff-of-nostalgia.html> (accessed November 2013).



Ill. 25: Bloodshot Bill and the album *The Lonesome Road*, Norton Records 2013.



Ill. 26: Kitty, Daisy and Lewis: *Smoking in Heaven* (10' edition), Sunday Best Records 2011, and PR photo, Sunday Best 2013.

mediality of the past.

Both of these cases have a special retro character being issued in the anachronistic format of the analog vinyl record in an age where digital formats and exchanges are the dominating form. Thus, it is not just a visual reference to the past in the normal format as was the case with older examples from Flash Cadillac and The B-52's. Instead, the whole release is a retro-aestheticized object. This material character demands a special practice of the listener who needs to play it on a gramophone in a different interaction with materiality than playing a digital device without material objects such as the album cover.

This of course contributes to the profound retro status of these artists, and can even exemplify different aspects of the current popularity of retro. Bloodshot Bill can be attributed to a more traditional subcultural role in the rockabilly revival, primarily active and recognized in this niche field with its logics and rules. Kitty, Daisy and Lewis breaks with the image of this underground status of the dedicated retro performance with their more accessible and popular form. In this way, they can be seen as belonging to the *retromania* condition and the popular spread of retro, which makes the massive identification with the past attractive for young performers. With retro's general popularity it signifies less of a statement of alternative underground status, and a shift in the character of retro practice: both of these contemporary "retro artists" show an increased investment in *materiality* in the perfection of 1950s-inspired looks, sounds and performances. Arguably, however, there is less *meaning* invested in the retro practice, understood as a critical position, such as in the anti-conservative ironic retro of the new wave, or formulating an opinion on the issues of the historical 1950s and its relation to the present.

### **Selling retro from the boutiques to the main street**

The popularity of retro has resulted in a veritable "retro industry" continuing the "mass-marketing of nostalgia" mentioned by Fredric Jameson and Andreas Huyssen. This is both a complex and vague concept, which involves several different factors and tendencies, such as the distribution of second-hand and vintage objects, the production and distribution of newly-produced retro-styled goods, retro branding and the use of the past in the making of a corporate identity, and the multileveled commercial experience-making of the past in contemporary culture. It is not my aim to cover all aspects of this, as it should be the subject of more thorough business studies. Instead, I will give a few examples from the distribution of retro in the popular field of fashion. The case studies of retro in the specific contexts of Montreal and Berlin in chapters 5 and 6 will also add to this.

The poet and fashion designer Criss Jami stated that “[i]n the fashion industry, everything goes retro except the prices.”<sup>56</sup> Again, retro styling involves dedicated enthusiasts as well as the casual mainstream fashion market. The mega-chain H & M (Hennes & Mauritz) is an example of this, using retro style in several collections and their promotion. The 2013 autumn and winter menswear collection in the UK was promoted as *Modern Retro*. According to the fashion blog All Things Menswear, the *Modern Retro* collection was “[t]aking colour and textural influences from the 70’s and mixing it with up to date designs and street style influences, [and H&M have in this way] created a beautifully versatile and accessible menswear collection.”<sup>57</sup> The inspiration, however, could also be seen as the 1950s with grey suits, shirts and sweaters.

Another example was the promotion of the 2012 Fall Fashion campaign with the pop star Lana Del Rey as model. Here, Del Rey performed the iconic 1950s classic “Blue Velvet” in a very 1950s-inspired dress and styling, with a visual style of “dusty colors and lots of grandiose Hollywood retro” as the fashion commentary said.<sup>58</sup> (Ill. 29, p. 152) Del Rey is known for her popular retro image: she describes her music as “Hollywood Sadcore” aiming at an image as a “Self-styled gangsta Nancy Sinatra.” This image is played out in her music videos, which are filled with references to recent history in a thorough, yet accessible and easily recognizable way. The video for “National Anthem” (2012), for instance, lets the singer impersonate Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy flirting with John F. Kennedy, played by black rapper ASAP Rocky. The commercial appearance in the H&M campaign and the simultaneous release of the song by Del Rey is of course a controversial transgression of the traditional boundaries between artistic expression and commercial marketing, and is typical of the complex position of the singer.

H&M has also used vintage design icons of the recent past to create special collections such as Marimekko in 2008 and Sonia Rykiel in 2009. In this way, the omnipresent chain of shops includes popular design history in its creation of the “now” look. The collections are not exact replicas, but combinations of new and old elements, matched to the tastes of a wide and casual audience, rather than a special-interest connoisseur field, and arguably also to the production and distribution strategies of the chain. H&M is notorious for having introduced *fast fashion* with an “18-week cycle” of “design -- overseas production -- release in stores -- clearance rack” (Fischer

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/465433-in-the-fashion-industry-everything-goes-retro-except-the-prices> (accessed January 2014).

<sup>57</sup> <http://allthingsmenswear.com/2013/09/11/hm-team-up-with-gq-for-their-modern-retro-menswear-aw13-campaign/> (accessed January 2014).

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.eurowoman.dk/mode/nyheder/se-forsmag-pa-hm-kampagnen-med-lana-del-rey/> (accessed January 2014).

2012, 14). For this system, a recognizable and iconic use of styles is convenient. Obviously, fashion changes quickly and does not invest a staying power in its objects. This is, of course, contrary to dedicated retro styles, which are expressed with a sense of belonging, opposed to first-cycle consumption (Gregson & Crewe 2003).

Contrary to the casual consumption and wide exposure that H&M is associated with, belonging is a key word in the niche boutiques positioning themselves as an alternative to high-street chains like H&M. Two examples focusing on Fiftiesness are the Copenhagen shops Rockahula and Mondo Kaos. Both are small, independent shops placed in areas known as shabby-chic and gentrified (Vesterbro and Nørrebro – an expected location for retro boutiques, according to the geographers Gregson and Crewe’s study of second-hand culture). Here, the retro shops are characterized by their aim to “inscribe the alternative into location” (Gregson and Crewe 2003, 34) to create an image as different from the usual commodification and massification.

Rockahula has existed for over 10 years and been a rendezvous for the rockabilly revival and related subcultures in Copenhagen (Ill. 27, p. 148). The shop presents itself as “the place to get dressed if you like the 50’s, 60’s, old cars, tattoos, hula and woodoo style, rock ‘n roll, Elvis and so on.”<sup>59</sup> The interior of the shop underlines this with a decoration of time pieces such as vintage posters, 1950s furniture and advertisements for concerts and events. What is sold is not vintage, but newly-produced men’s and women’s clothing. Women’s dresses with names such as “Betty Page” and “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” net stockings and even bullet bras. The men’s clothing includes a Dickies Eisenhower Jacket, Western shirts and t-shirts with symbols of rockabilly Fiftiesness such as Sun Records and drag racing. I will comment further on rockabilly culture and its configuration of Fiftiesness in the following chapter.

Mondo Kaos (Ill. 28, p. 148) also sells newly produced clothes in the image of the 1950s, “inspired by looks from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.” It is exclusively women’s clothing, and the subcultural link is less evident here, even if the owners refer to the rockabilly subculture as a considerable part of the audience. It appears as a fashionable clothing boutique, nicely styled with a careful selection of dresses. The style of the dresses varies from “pinup” inspired colorful looks to more classic styles. According to the shop’s presentation of itself, it offers “retro outfits to suit virtually any occasion, whether it is a formal evening out or a casual day at the office. Bathing suits

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/RockahulaShop/info> (accessed January 2014).





Ill. 27: Rockahula shop, Istedgade Copenhagen. Photos: Kristian Handberg 2012.



Ill. 28: Flyer from Mondo Kaos shop, Birkegade Copenhagen.

for lounging at the beach, playsuits for pin up aficionados, cardigans to wear over a dress and dungarees for the greaser girl style.”<sup>60</sup> An example of the presentation of a dress is as follows:

The Grace Dress by Emily and Fin is an absolute stunner. This satin cotton dress is utterly glamorous with it's 50's style skirt, pleated from the waistband down. We adore the V-shaped neckline and the lapels on the shoulders. The dress maintains it's gorgeous 50's shape with darts at the bust and back and has concealed pockets at the sides.

*(<http://www.mondokaos.dk/emily-and-fin-grace-dress-harlequin.html> accessed January 2014)*

This knowing and suggestive description shows the accessibility of the perfected 1950s look. Not as an outsider style like the previous role of retro, but as fashion in a more conventional sense. It is not old and worn clothes, but newly-produced items that secure the perfect and attractive look. In this way a boutique like Mondo Kaos is a good example of the current popularity of retro and Fiftiesness.

The borders between the “alternative” retro in the small-scale boutiques and the big-scale distribution of the main street chains can be blurred. For example, the chain Beyond Retro sells vintage clothing in eight shops in the United Kingdom and Sweden. At carefully chosen locations such as in Stockholm’s hipster district Södermalm, this chain combines the characteristics of the “indie retro shop” with the more accessible and advertised chain.

This kind of thorough and perfected, yet easily accessible, retro goes beyond former distinctions such as the underground and the mainstream status, and the knowing and the carnivalesque types of retro appropriation of the 1970s in 1990s Britain described by Gregson, Brooks and Crewe (2001). Here, a casual “so-bad-that-it-is good” usage of 1970s clothes for theme parties as a *carnivalesque* form of retro is contrasted with the *knowing* form of a more dedicated retro practice (Gregson, Brooks and Crewe 2001, 9-12). At first sight, this could be applied to the cases of big, casual audience of the H&M collections versus the boutiques of 1950s styled clothing. Yet H & M collections do not appear carnivalesque, but rather classic, as the boutiques make a fashionable style available to an audience not necessarily related to subcultures and other groups defined by dedicated “knowing” and a self-concept as alternative and underground.

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.mondokaos.dk/butiks-info/> (accessed January 2014).

### **The retro festival: retro as cultural event**

As described in the introduction, the retro festival has emerged as a cultural form bringing together several aspects and practiced forms of retro culture. This is a recently emerged phenomenon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century uniting markets and collector fairs with rock festivals and history-themed events. At festivals such as The Retro Festival (<http://www.retrofestival.co.uk/>), Vintage by Hemmingway (<http://www.vintagefestival.co.uk/>), and The Festival of Vintage, (<http://www.festivalofvintage.co.uk/York.html>) with its slogan “There is no time like the past,” the modern past (in two of the festivals defined as 1930-1960 and 1930-1980, respectively) is celebrated in performances by original artists as well as contemporary retro artists, as shows, stalls and exhibitions put an amazing amount of work into bringing the past and not least the 1950s into the present.

The retro festival focus has even started to enter official cultural activities. One example is the Danish cultural festival Golden Days in Copenhagen, which started with the historical theme of the “Golden Age” of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Danish arts and culture and took the 1950s as the theme for its 2012 edition.<sup>61</sup> The extraordinary success of the festival (it was nominated as the cultural event of the year,<sup>62</sup> and the opening 1950s party was repeated in 2013 by popular demand<sup>63</sup>) obviously coincides with the streetwise popularity of retro culture. The traditional museological content was complemented with street festivals and dancing parties, reaching out to a new audience and including retro subcultures like rockabillicies, roller derby players and balboa swing (Ill. 30, p. 151).

The retro festival could obviously be seen in the discourse of the musealization, bringing everyday culture and materials into the territory of the museum, and the museum into the sphere of everyday life. It also ties together the aesthetic, the historical and the entertaining on a large and official scale. Against this background, I will state that the retro festival is a benchmark in the spread of retro and will possibly be developed further in the future.

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<sup>61</sup>The Golden Days festival started in Copenhagen in 1993 as a collaboration of museums, cultural organizations and institutions ([http://www.goldendays.dk/festival\\_50erne.html](http://www.goldendays.dk/festival_50erne.html)).

<sup>62</sup> <http://politiken.dk/ibyen/nyheder/ibyenprisen/ECE1910765/aarets-begivenhed/> (accessed January 2014).

<sup>63</sup> <http://politiken.dk/ibyen/nyheder/natteliv/ECE1957173/vega-genopliver-1950er-bal-efter-folkeligt-pres/> (accessed January 2014).



**Ill. 29: Lana del Rey singing “Blue Velvet” for H&M. Press photo: H&M 2012.**



**Ill. 30: Fifites styling for the opening party of the Golden Days 2012 Festival 2012. Photo: Politiken/Golden Days.**

## The fifties as materialized modern

This chapter's analysis of the retro revivals of the 1950s emphasizes the central status of this decade in retro culture. It would then be appropriate to ask *why and how the 1950s?*, which I will now comment upon.

Retro's fixation on its historical object is well understood as a mythic construct of *the Fifties*, rather than as a representation of the historical time from 1950 to 1959 and all its historical, cultural and social complexities, as Sprengler suggests. In this way, retro is based on selected and recognizable props, references and signs, creating an image of Fiftiesness. In Fred Davis' words on nostalgia, there is: "more than 'mere past' involved. It is a past imbued with special qualities, which, moreover, acquires its significance from the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features of our present lives." (Davis 1979, 13). Thus, it is not surprising that it is a different "Fifties" that has been constructed, and that the revived 1950s have changed since the 1970s. For example, *Grease* is now commonly remembered as a disco-era 1970s artefact, Richard Horne's book *Fifties Style* may primarily connote *Eightiesness* in its layout's aesthetics, and new wave LPs are in themselves examples of retro culture.

But there are also deliberately different versions or essences that are drawn out of the 1950s in the various forms of retro culture. Sprengler recognizes different "kinds of Fifties" in movies, such as the "Lounge Fifties" of the urban night-life with its "Rat Pack" style and its universe of "porkpie hats, hi-fi, cocktails, Daddy-O!, Playboy, smoky clubs, atom-inspired furniture and cigarette girls" (Sprengler 2009, 41), "Hollywood Fifties" inspired by the era's *Film Noir* movies, with the "Suburban Horror Fifties" as a special suburban variation. The most common is by far the "Populuxe Fifties," referring to Hine's characterization of the material culture of early consumer society. For example, this would be the case with The B-52's' *Wild Planet* and Flash Cadillac's *Sons of The Beaches* covers described previously.

To this, a "Rock'n'roll Fifties" could be added with leather jackets and young rebels. It is this kind of Fifties that John Lennon's and The Clash's album covers signal an alliance with. As a further developed form of this, the "Rockabilly Fifties" has emerged, aimed at the authenticity of the blues and country in a rural universe different from the pop of the big cities and the suburb. This is the case with contemporary artists such as Bloodshot Bill and Kitty, Daisy and Lewis. In the landscape of contemporary culture, this rough, working-class Fifties is different from the equally popular *Mad Men* Fifties inspired by the trendsetting media phenomenon with a rich, urban

atmosphere of cocktail bars and classic menswear. The *Mad Men* TV series (2007-) is set in the 1960s (starting in 1960), yet is obviously in the Populuxe era (which Hine dates from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s), with iconic “populuxe props” such as the Chip and Dip set, Mid-century Modern furniture, Tomorrowland (the setting and title of the last episode of the series’ fourth season), and lounge music, and is arguably more related to the collectively remembered Fiftiesness than the Sixtiesness of Beatlemania, social and cultural protest movements, and the counter culture.<sup>64</sup> *Mad Men* obviously forms a symbolic universe and a versioning of its epoch, and its popularity corresponds to the demand for Fifties retro.

With these different varieties and the wide spread of retro, there are obviously different incentives for the 1950s being the past of choice. Sometimes revisionings of the 1950s can even be opposed to each other, as for example in the early 1980s, when neo-conservatives praised the 1950s, while the new wave ironic retro used the materialism and conservatism of the past to criticize the present, as Horn describes.

Despite this, I will claim, there is a common experience of simultaneous modernity and old-fashioned-ness clinging to the 1950s, understood as the beginning of the post-WWII *modern world* with its affluence and consumer society, modern media and American cultural dominance. Americanness and Americanization were much-coveted and debated terms in the European 1950s, associating the good and bad sides of modernity with USA and its material culture. The Fifties personify the breakthrough of these conditions, and its popularity as the object of retro culture is tied to this role. Furthermore, the Fifties seem to embody the adolescence of modern America, and even nostalgia as such, as the film studies of Hurup and Sprengler suggest. There are important factors behind this. With the spread of TV, film, radio, records and magazines in the 1950s, media material is easily available, and the decade can be said to be the first to represent itself on a mass-scale through mass-media (Sprengler 2009, 41). The decade is even seen as the birth of important cultural forms in the years to follow such as rock music, TV-series, and youth culture and consumption.

This has obviously offered material for the canon of symbolic material that has made the decade so recognizable. Another factor is the sheer availability of material from that time, compared to previous epochs. As Thomas Hine writes in *Populuxe*, the time was “one of history’s

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<sup>64</sup> I will not go into a further analysis of the *Mad Men* series and its popularity as this is treated in an extensive literature across the media scape from popular commentary to academic analysis. Because of this popularity, and the reflexive substance of the series itself, *Mad Men* would be a case in itself that I have chosen to leave out.

great shopping spree” with “so many things to buy” for so many (Hine 1986, 3). Compared to the handicrafts of previous times, these things would often go out of fashion quickly and be outmoded, bearing the epoch’s “planned obsolescence.” But as Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory* points out, things are still materially present after they have gone out of value, and can gain value as “durables” (Thompson 1979). As stated in Chapter 2, retro is a twisted form of durables, but the material culture and the materiality of its objects are an important part of its practice and cultural history. As mentioned earlier, materiality was a major incentive for Hine’s and Hess’ period portraits, as they characterize the period through its things and the materiality of these things, as the development of retro culture since the 1970s is getting more and more obsessed with materiality and things. In the beginning, as in the “nostalgia films” and music of the 1970s, the 1950s objects were campy and quaint props that would not go into the present as valuables, like the cars and clothes of *Grease*.

In the 1980s, retro style was to a large extent rhetorical, an ironic answer to the Reagan politics of old values and an expression of the postmodernist stance, as seen in Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X* (1991). But the fashion of irony and kitsch was complemented with the historical and aesthetical investment of books such as Hess’ *Googie* and Hine’s *Populuxe*, as well as the collector and enthusiast cultures establishing 1950s lounge music or drive-in architecture as a desirable pursuit. Looking at contemporary retro culture, there is more of an insistent presence of *things*, not hidden behind the fig leaf of irony. Thus, retro objects are owned, consumed and appreciated in an immediate and profound way by a large audience. The kind of things and practices retro objects take part in also increases, as retro takes on formerly unnoticed pursuits such as cooking and needlework, and bodily practices like styling and tattoos, also being a symptom of the aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone). Furthermore, retro themes are entering the official *musealization* culture, as in the Copenhagen Golden Days festival of 2012, as well as becoming a general reference for design and advertising, where a 1950s retro style is used regardless of content.

Besides this material dimension, retro’s creation of a common past in the present as described in this chapter is very relevant to cultural memory. The 1950s are collectively remembered as the recent yet distant past, where we became modern on an everyday and material level. The objects of retro culture may then be seen as *Lieux de Mémoire*: real and symbolic, material and immaterial sites where collective memory is crystallized and given the “symbolic aura” of affective memory rather than critical history (Nora 1989, 8). It would also be relevant to

consider the current retro craze as part of the debated history- or memory boom (Huyssen 2003) that marks “a turning towards the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of the earlier decades of twentieth century modernity,” (Huyssen 2003, 22), trading “present futures” for “present pasts” in Western cultural imagination. Today, the 1950s are remembered for the present futures that we are reluctant to produce despite all technological and mediated means: the futuristic Tomorrowland of the 1950s has become the retrospective Yesterland of cyberspace.

It would, however, be wrong to see retro culture as compensating nostalgia or as a reckless surface culture feasting on the end of history. As this chapter has shown, retro and its use in the 1950s has been a central part of the last 40 years of culture, and it has been involved in punk, postmodernism, digital culture and the search for the real and authentic. In all of these cases, retro has taken a double and polemical position, reflecting past and present as an aesthetic as well as a way of dealing with our past. Retro is thus a dynamic component of contemporary culture that will supposedly also be part of our future.

## **Conclusion: Framing the Fifties**

The 1950s have been the most popular topic for retro, which began with the framing of the archetype of Fifties retro throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. The concept was adapted from the French *mode retro*, which concerned the Second World War in a more controversial form. The direction towards the civil past of the disregarded 1950s was a remarkable move, which should be seen as way of creating a cultural memory of this recent past. Through the following decades, retro has been shown to exceed generational nostalgia, and formed a persistent trend with variations of theme in the revival of a specific past.

As a combination of the aesthetic, the historical and the entertaining, retro’s approach to the past can be seen as related to a discourse of *musealization*, introducing the collection and the exhibition logic of the museum into daily life, and bringing the museum into leisure culture. Retro has developed several specific forms, included new material, and made different configurations of Fiftiesness through the years. Generally, it has been associated with a stance of



alternative culture and a reinterpretation of mainstream culture from the 1950s to an alternative culture of the present. This has arguably changed with the current popularity of retro, which tends to exceed the former distinctions, and which has made retro culture available to a wider audience. This contemporary situation will also be the topic of the next chapters' case studies on specific contexts.

## **Chapter 5:**

# **Montreal Modern: Retro culture and the modern past in Montreal**

### **Introduction**

After having examined the role of the 1950s in the development and distribution of retro in the previous chapter, I will now focus on retro in specific locations to explore in depth its role in cultural memory and the circulation of things.

In this chapter I will analyze retro culture in Montreal, Canada. There are several reasons for the choice of this location. Montreal is recognized for its cultural life and many “scenes” of retro culture, which are even branded in official city guides and movies. Located in Canada, which is often described as being placed between the cultures of the USA and Europe, Montreal is interesting in the context of retro culture in the Western World. The study of retro in Canada will reflect the cultural influences and relations between general trends and local specificities in contemporary culture in an evocative way. Furthermore, the location in Francophone Quebec and the issues of cultural identity and political status in this province are of course inscribed in the culture of Montreal, which is divided into predominantly Anglophone and Francophone parts. This is exceedingly a topic of the recent history since the “Quiet Revolution” in the 1960s with increased autonomy and promotion of Quebecois culture, and today independence is even mentioned as an option for Quebec. Montreal is a city based on a complex and somewhat contested memory of its recent history, and the materialities and memories of the modern period after 1945 have a special significance and presence for the city today. Montreal’s cultural identity is formed in cultural memories of modern culture, and how the city has at once a history as a booming New World town and as a town with a “late and abrupt way into modernity.” In this chapter I will analyze at how its retro culture reflects this, and how it is an active part of the city’s memory work and cultural memory.

My analysis will discuss how retro culture in Montreal contributes to the awareness of the city’s cultural identity and history, and how regional specificity interacts with international influence in the formation of contemporary cultural identity via retro. In particular, two conceptions of the “20<sup>th</sup> century Modern” are identified as present in retro culture in Montreal: the raw and seedy red light past of the city’s notorious “wide-open” years of the 1940s and 1950s, and the

forward-looking space age modernism of the following period with the Expo '67 World Exposition as a key symbol. These mythical epochs work as symbolic universes for the current retro culture – as with the versions of *Fiftiesness* described in the previous chapter, to which these specific images of the era add local variety. These common pasts are also constructed through constellations of things and practices as *materializations* of cultural memory. I will identify the central places for these materializations in the city's great number of retro shops and in the cultural practices which form its retro scenes.

First, the cultural and historical context of Montreal and Quebec is briefly presented. I will focus on the epochs of the 1940s/1950s and the 1960s, as the memory of these eras is seen to be especially formative for the contemporary identity of Montreal. Then the core – retro culture in Montreal, is described and analyzed. This is approached through analyses of two distinct groups of retro shops with different dispositions that suggest different developments in the retro culture. I will observe how different images of the past are laid out in the shops, and how this relates to the memories of the city's recent past. Other retro practices, such as shops for newly-sewn retro clothing, retro markets and festivals, Francophone retro bands on contemporary musical scenes, and the reissuing of obscure Quebec rock, are also taken into account. For the discussion of retro culture's interaction with the city's cultural memory, I will draw upon the distinctions made by M. Christine Boyer in *The City of Collective Memory*, and of course the theories of materiality and memory presented in the previous chapters. The concepts of the scene and circulation are used to characterize retro in the context of the geographical space of the city and the historical context of its culture.

This chapter's analysis is based on research conducted in Montreal in the fall of 2012. While living in Montreal, I was a visiting scholar at the McGill University and the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. This gave me a good opportunity to approach the study of the cultural context of Montreal. As someone who came from the outside I cannot claim an insider's perspective or a specialist's knowledge of Montreal and Canadian culture. But as the topic of Canadian culture is rarely brought to attention, at least in a Danish context, I see a special relevance in focusing on this through the case study of Montreal. I should underline that my study is not an anthropological field study, a sociological analysis, or a business study of the retro trade. Instead, it is a cultural study of retro, based on observations of contemporary cultural practices discussed in regards to the cultural historical background. It is not meant to be complete or represent every experience and practice of retro in Montreal. As pointed out previously, retro is a widespread and multiple

phenomena practiced at many levels. And as Montreal is characterized by a variety of different ethnic and cultural groups, experiences and memories other than those of the Anglophone/Francophone cultural groups will be discussed here. My analysis offers a reading of a special aspect of the past in contemporary retro culture, which seems to have a special attraction and significance in Montreal. The case study displays an example of retro's general popularity and how an international trend is widely adapted. To this it adds the overlooked significance of the specific context and how its materialities and memories form the basis for retro.

### **Montreal's Modern Past**

Montreal has a population of 1.6 million, making it the second-largest city in Canada (after Toronto) and the second-largest Francophone city in the world (after Paris), but it is not the governmental seat of either Canada or Quebec, and it hardly has the same tone-setting status for the Franco-cultural world as Paris. Even though Montreal is an old city by North American standards, founded by French settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its identity as “Quebec’s Metropolis” and the capital of culture and nightlife in Canada is defined by its modern history, with a prominent modern mythology in both the daytime and nightlife of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity. With a self-understanding differing from that of the old-fashioned Quebec City, the traditionalism of rural Quebec, the representative capital of Ottawa, and the hard-working business centre of Toronto, Montreal has its own dynamic and identity, often standing out from those of its surroundings. As the Irish cultural theorist Kieran Keohane writes in *Symptoms of Canada: An Essay on the Canadian Identity* (1997), “Canadians contrast cold, anal-attentive Toronto with the lively Montreal, which has that ever-so slightly-decadent (and alluring) excess, cosmopolitan Parisian pretention” (Keohane 1997: 24). But still, Montreal is definitely the urban center of Quebec and the hotbed of its cultural currents. It has been the site of cultural and political manifestations of the Quebecois, from Expo 67 and the separatist terrorist actions of the 1960s, to the building of prominent cultural institutions, all the while becoming the centre of Quebec media and business today. Montreal is a city of both regional and cosmopolitan aspirations, the center of Quebecois identity and the urban counterpoint to it. It has been the historical site of Quebecois negotiations of cultural identity, and it illustrates perhaps more than any other North American site the position between the Old and New World and their

influences as expressed in advertising statements such as “Montreal is a slice of old Europe in a pie of contemporary design” (Lonely Planet Guide, <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/canada/montreal>).

Contrasting the flexibility (or “emptiness”) of Canadian cultural identity as such (i.e. Keohane 1997), Quebec identity is highly contested, with independence being an actual possibility, as it is the stated goal of the Parti Quebecois, which currently the province (before the General Elections spring 2014). Following centuries of colonial and English dominance of the French, the recent past contains a dramatic struggle for political and cultural autonomy and recognition, and a late and abrupt way into modernity.

Excluded from influence, Quebecois culture was, until far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, withdrawn and primarily concerned with tradition and rural life, with the Catholic Church as the only centre of intellectual and cultural affairs, which promoted an anti-modern and morally strict worldview. This awareness was expressed by 19<sup>th</sup> century minister Thomas Chapais: “At the present time, there are two Frances, the radical France and the conservative France, the France of the unbelievers and Catholic France, the France that blasphemes and the France that prays. The second France [Quebec] is our France.” (Rioux 1978, 60). Thus, Quebec was relatively untouched by the burgeoning modernist experimental cultural movements in French culture in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The backwardness and conservatism continued under the strict and regressive rule of Premier Minister Maurice Duplessis (1890-1959), who governed the province from 1936-1939 and 1944-1959. This period is even known as “Le Grand Noirceur” (*The Great Darkness*), with limited social rights, political corruption, and the persecution of unions and alternative forms of thought or political organization.

Paradoxically, Montreal was, in these very years in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, known as a notorious, wide-open city of vice, as vividly described in William Weintraub’s *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and 1950s* (1996/2004). Fuelled by events such as the US prohibition era (1920-33) and the many soldiers serving in WWII, drinking, gambling and prostitution were a dominating force in the city’s life and reputation (together with a scene of nightclubs, music and entertainment), supported by a notoriously corrupt police force and city government. This character fed a whole wave of colorful pulp novels, such as Al Palmer’s *Sugarpuss on Dorchester Street* (1950 – reissued 2013) and David Montrose’s *Murder Over Dorval* (1952), urban *exposé* reportages like “Montreal Confidential” in the magazine *Photo* (1953), the book *Montreal Confidential* by Al Palmer (1950, reissued 2004) and the newspaper articles of the reformist *Pax Plante*, all of which revealed in detail the city’s illicit underground. Will Straw has

shown (Straw 1992 and 2010) how these reportages were part of a general “literature and cinema of urban exposé that flourished during the late 1940s and 1950s in North America,” (Straw 1992, 5) and how Montreal became known as one of North America’s most notorious cities of sin. Thus, the exposé testifies to the vice and simultaneous fascination and indignation towards it, as part of the American 20<sup>th</sup> century post-war modernity, which was especially strong and present in Montreal. It also shows that a cultural myth was instantly formed, not least as a counter-image to define oneself against, as it was often used in the subsequent period of modernization. Thus, the 1950s in Montreal have conventionally been inscribed in the collective memory as a dark, pre-modern era, but also with an undercurrent of modern vices and entertainment that give it a certain attraction. The 1950s are also associated with the introduction of American consumer objects and popular culture, which were looked upon with concern, both by the Anglophone urban cultural elite and Francophone religious authorities.

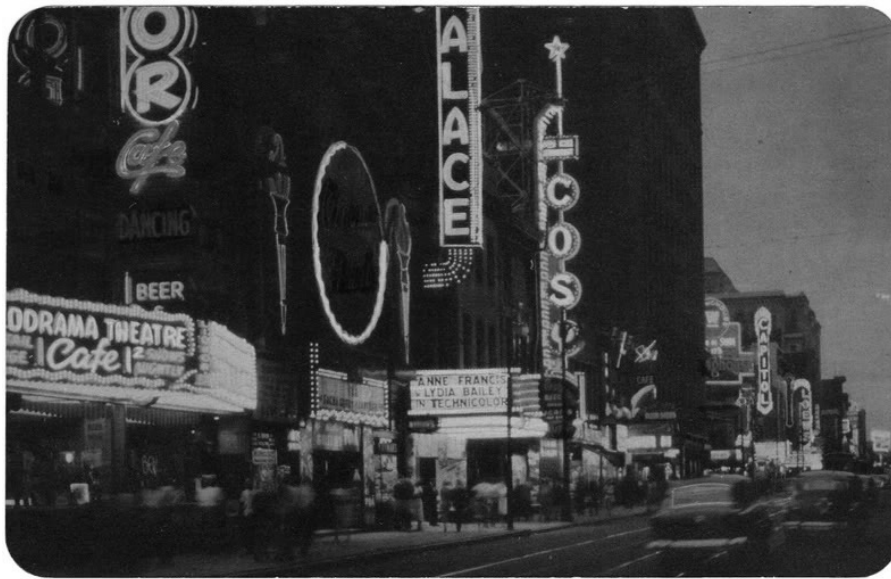
When Quebec went from *Le Grand Noirceur* into *La Revolution Tranquille* (The Quiet Revolution) after the death of Duplessis in 1959, Montreal entered a period of self-conscious modernity, led by Mayor Jean Drapeau (1916-1999), who, together with Pax Plante, had previously fought campaigns against vice and corruption. Urban renewal removed run-down houses, especially in the Francophone working-class Eastern part of the town (including the infamous red-light district) and replaced them with modernist high-rise buildings. A new downtown city centre of skyscrapers was built, the 188 meter high Place Ville Marie (completed in 1962) became a key monument, a new highway route was cut through the city, and a metro system was inaugurated for the cultural rebirth of modern Montreal: the Expo 67 Category One World Exposition in 1967. This event was actively promoted in the city, as well as in Quebec and the rest of Canada. In this way, the 1960s became a “familiar narrative of Montreal’s modernization,” (Straw 1992, 6) which saw an active self-reimagining as “a serious self-conscious city so different from the jaunty, rakish church-and-nightclub town it used to be” (Weintraub 2004, 273), moving from provincial primitivism to modern cosmopolitanism, replacing rural traditionalism with urban modernism.

Expo 67 contained most of these themes being a successful and utterly forward-looking world’s fair. It had monorails and multi-screen projections, and presented Canada’s provinces and the rest of the world in cool modernist pavilions, with Buckminster Fuller’s dome for the American pavilion as a landmark. As Rhona Richman Kenneally and Johanne Sloan write in their recent anthology on the event, “Expo brought art, architecture, design, fashion and technology together into a glittering, modern package,” where “almost every pavilion was striking for its

modern-looking appearance,” with “modernism itself as a lingua franca of Expo 67 seemingly capable of traversing borders, nationalities and even ideologies” (Kenneally and Sloan 2010, 11).

Expo 67 was characterized by such ultramodern landmarks as the futuristic dome of Buckminster Fuller’s American pavilion (now the Montreal Biosphere), multi-screen projections and multimedia experiments, Space race props in the sensationally popular Soviet pavilion, a confident and modern Quebec pavilion, stewardess-like uniformed hostesses and a monorail train driving around it all (see Ill. 32, p. 163). The exposition took place under the slogan “Man and his World”/”Terres des Hommes,” signaling a humanist awareness, adding to the pure materialism of the modern wonders and resonating with the cultural awareness of the 1960s. As historian John Lownbrough concluded in his recent book on the Expo, “The fifties flirtation with gadgets and technology as evidence of the future had ceded to a more earnest and searching spirit” that “sought to tie technology with personal growth,” “linking humanity’s personal growth with advances in technology” (Lownbrough 2012, 221). The Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson even called the Expo a “psychedelic experience” (Lownbrough 2012, 8) while the contemporary press called it a “futuristic Venice” (Le Monde): “Whereas the Brussels fair [The Expo 58 World’s Fair in Brussels in 1958] represented the atomic age (despite the Sputnik orbiting the previous year), the Montreal Exhibition depicts the space age” (The New York Times, both from Lownbrough 2012).

Expo was a successful operation for its Canadian, Quebecois and Montreal organizers, as a manifestation of the modernity and progress of the 1960s (“So much of it avowedly, almost giddisly, futuristic” (Lownbrough 2012, 7)) even though, according to Lownbrough, there is indeed “something slightly ‘square’ of the earnestness of Expo” and its “giddy futurism” (ibid.) in the eyes of today. But in the 1960s it was an ideal *materialization* of the modern, also for the troubled city of Montreal, for which it worked as a “glorified alter-ego” (Lownbrough), built on new artificial islands in the St. Lawrence River. Expo gave the city a new identity, manifestly modern and in opposition to its previous reputation. Kenneally and Sloan suggest that: “Expo 67 can be seen as a kind of utopic urban satellite in opposition to the wider municipality that fed and sustained it – a municipality that, despite the intentions of Mayor Jean Drapeau to sanitize Montreal’s street scene by sweeping its detritus (human and otherwise) under the rug for the visitors, maintained a seamy side commensurate with its reputation for the hedonistic activities” (Kenneally and Sloan 2010, 17).



Ill. 31: Montreal as a neon-lit “wide-open city”. Postcard from 1952.



Ill. 32: The Quebec pavillon and the famous monorail at Expo 67, Postcard 1967.



Concentrating these essences, we can see Expo 67 as expressing one modern myth, the Apollonian, in contrast to the seedy Dionysian night-life mythology of red light Montreal. Both are cornerstones in conceptions of popular modernity and its special meanings in and for Montreal. They appear as strong poles in the city's cultural memory, and they also have a significant presence in retro culture, as the following analysis will show. As elsewhere in the Western world, the post-war decades were an important and formative period in Montreal and Quebec, but in a spectacular way, the epoch was here framed by the eye-catching images of the Red-lights Fifties and the Expo Sixties.

### **Quebecité in Modern Culture**

Expo is definitely a *Lieu de mémoire*, a condensed symbolic site of meaning (Nora 1989), strongly present in the cultural memory of Montreal. A book called *1967: The Last Good Year* (Pierre Berton 1997) observes that for English Canada, Expo 67 was the culmination of Canada's centennial year, and therefore emblematic of the nation's modernization, while, in the collective memory of Quebec, it represented one more step in the modernization process and political awakening of the province. Similarly, a recent study shows that Expo is remembered differently depending on who you ask: as a Quebec achievement by original visitors of Quebecois origin and as a Canadian achievement by original visitors from the rest of Canada (this study also points to the difference between private and public memories and recognizing clear patterns in both<sup>65</sup>), indicating its role in cultural identity formation. For Quebec, Expo was an entrance into the modern world, catching up with a cosmopolitan and universal modernist style that was far removed from the inferiority, lowness and provincialism often associated with the *Quebecité*.

In her study *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion* (2011), theatre and performance historian Erin Hurley writes about the cultural performances of a Quebec identity. She recognizes that the time of Expo 67 was marked by an “urgent construction of a Quebec national project” (Hurley 2011). Cultural manifestations were especially important for Quebec, since it, “[I]like other nations without a state, [...] relies upon cultural production to vouch its national status” (Hurley 2011, 18). Determining what defines, and matters, as Quebecois culture is, however, often difficult in an affluent postcolonial society that is heavily

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<sup>65</sup> David Anderson and Viviane Gosselin: *Private and public memories of Expo 67: a case study of recollections of Montreal's World's Fair, 40 years after the event*, *Museum & Society*, 6(1), 1-21, 2008.

influenced by the high culture of the Old World and the popular culture of the USA. This is also the case for Canadian culture in general, as “Canada is one of those mid-sized countries, like Australia, which, while developed and prosperous, nevertheless devote their cultural life to artefacts which they do not produce,” (Straw 1999, 4-5) in the words of media scholar and current director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, Will Straw.

With no celebrated authentic tradition and a modernity that has long been in the shadows, Quebecois culture concerns “finely grained attributions of quebecité” (Hurley 2011) in translations of other cultures (Sherry Simon 2006), in accents, in hybrids and combinations of ordinary, vernacular material far from recognition by cultural elites. One example is the distinctly local *Joual* dialect, an “English-infected sociolect” of “Quebecois French with urban influences,” (Hurley 2011: 74) spoken in Montreal working-class neighbourhoods. This officially devalued and impure language was famously given attention in Michel Tremblay’s play *Le Belles-sœurs*, which premiered in 1968 and immediately became a classic work of modern Quebec identity and also a definite *Lieu de Memoire*: significant entities that become symbolic elements in the memorial heritage of the community, according to Pierre Nora. Its depiction of the mundane everyday of the working-class in Montreal’s shabby eastern part recognizes the artefacts, manners and culture of this otherwise unworthy matter, such as the cultural dispositions of Coca Cola, chansons, and dreaming of new florally patterned furniture for the living room through the collection of coupons, all pronounced in the characteristic *Joual* language.

Another Quebecois notion is the term *quétaine* (sometimes *kétaine*) – a negatively laden statement applied to tasteless objects emblematic of cultural poverty, such as a flower-covered shower cap or the Elvis-imitating protagonist in the popular Quebecois comedies *Elvis Gratton* (1981-). According to Bill Marshall, “*Le quétaine* is the visual and iconographic equivalent of joual, culturally delegitimized Anglo-French hybrid of borrowings and copies.” (Marshall 2001: 189). It is a recent concept dating from the 1960s with various myths of origin.<sup>66</sup> Bad taste and backwardness are the main features of *quétaine*, though it is still (like kitsch in the Greenbergian understanding) a product of modernity and mass-production. During my study of the kitsch-cultivating spheres of retro culture, nobody wanted to associate their practice with *quétaine*. This indicates that embarrassment and negative connotations are still associated with the term: *quétaine*

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<sup>66</sup> One version says that is derived from a Scottish family “Keating” in Sainte-Hyacinthe for their impoverishment. Later it was popularized in the Radio Canada sitcom *Moi et l’autre* from 1966-1971 (Marshall 2001: 189).

is the negative twin of retro's knowing distinction, with its failed backwardness and bad taste without irony and, maybe, a too local flavour.

The presence of these concepts is important for understanding the character of modern Québecité. Quebec is in an active process of national consolidation, for example with a new national library in Montreal, a national art museum in Quebec, and countless festivals and events. At the same time, however, a feeling of inferiority clings to Québecité: that of a dominated lower class majority in cultural poverty, and not even in possession of an authentic identity in Montreal, with a constant preference for the high culture of the Old World and the popular culture of the USA.

In my analysis I will suggest understanding retro as a response to this status, with its recognition of a modern local heritage, made of vernacular culture and including its imports and accents. Works of high culture, such as contemporary art, sometimes take in objects of québécoise as an ironic celebration of kitsch or as symbols of the cultural underbelly. For example, the works of Montreal-born artist David Hoffos depicts Canadian wood cabins and small towns in a disturbing and uncanny way. And Canadian author and artist Douglas Coupland's book *Souvenir of Canada* (2002) and the installation "Canada House" (2004) stages trivial objects such as canned food, ice-hockey merchandise and Canadian slang expressions to offer a portrayal of Canada "that only Canadians would get," identifying Canadianness as materialized in unadorned every-day objects. Breaking somewhat with these ironic and distanced depictions, retro, through its connoisseurship and its aesthetic and historicizing investment, offers a way of rehabilitating and revaluing the past. This of course also includes a vast degree of selection and myth-making, and it has the incentive of aesthetics and lifestyle rather than of a historiographical inquiry. Still, retro is a thorough investigation of the recent past, often recognizing the finely grained attributes of Québecité, providing a consistent reinterpretation of local identity.

To conclude, Québecité, and to a certain degree Canadianness as such, are conventionally undefined and lowly valued cultural identities. Even though Québécois identity has been given a new political focus in recent years, it is still contested and surrounded by uncertainty. Not everybody agrees with the promoted images of Québecité, especially in a big city like Montreal, which contains many identities and a complex cultural memory. Expo 67 offered a cosmopolitan identity with its promoted universal modernism, which was successful for a number of years and stands as a positive memory for many. However, similar aspirations for a unifying event with the 1976 Summer Olympics turned out as a financial disaster, bringing the city to face constant debts and a state of disrepair to many of the prestige buildings from the 1960s. Political

and cultural divisions have also characterized the city, and made a uniform identity difficult. My analysis discusses how retro reacts to this complex status, constructing a Montreal identity by using the specificity of material things and memories.

## **Retro scenes in Montreal**

As suggested in Chapter 2, the “scene” is an adequate concept to describe the complex character of retro. Some retro scenes form a coherent whole, like the one devoted to 1950s rockabilly culture, which, apart from the music, involves clothing, styling, cars and body culture, such as tattoos and burlesque dancing (see *Rockabilly 514*, a documentary on the rockabilly scene in Montreal). Others concentrate on a specific genre (collecting Quebec 1960s Yé-yé records, for example) or casual retro references in fashion and pop culture. Montreal has a proportionally big and conspicuous system of scenes for retro culture, corresponding to the city’s status as a centre for arts, creative industries and education. For this study, I have chosen to focus on some easily identifiable and accessible sites in the form of two groups of retro shops. These are obvious centres in the circulation of retro and demonstrate the current demand for, and valuation of, retro objects. Their abundant presence shows the popularity of retro and an availability that reaches beyond small, exclusive scenes and the scavenging of cheap objects.

Another important concept is circulation. Retro implies a new status for its objects, for instance when an old thing is used in a new way, or, when an old image is applied to a newly produced thing. Retro is a phase in an object’s circulation and its biography (as described by Appadurai and Kopytoff in Chapter 2) rather than an end station. The image of the door used by Kevin Hetherington is useful. Things might go in and out of the door as retro, and the room of retro may be experienced as open or closed. Similarly, the rubbish theory of Thompson illustrates the life-cycles and circulations of things. Circulation asks the questions “why is it that some forms move or are moved along? What limits are imposed on cultural forms as the condition of their circulation across various types of social space?” (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003, 387). In this way, circulation can illuminate power structures and cultural hierarchies, and of course aesthetic preferences in social space. Circulation happens at many levels and different paces. It can be thought of as having a spatial form (describing how things circulate in a particular city’s space) as well as a temporal dimension (describing how *things*, such as retro’s objects, circulate over time).

The city is often associated with the accelerated circulation of contemporary life and the distribution of new things. But, as Straw shows in the article “Spectacles of Waste” (2009), the city is also characterized by the accumulation and circulation of the past and its artifacts, giving it a character of “slowness,” as “a space in which artifacts and other historical residues are stored, and in which movement is blocked” (Straw 2009 195). “The city is a machine for delay in part through its capacities for storage, through the spaces for accumulation (like pawnshops and used book stores) that take shape and proliferate within it” (Ibid.). Retro takes shape and proliferates from the city’s delay and accumulation of past. This happens through material objects being kept in the archive status of bargain shops and attics, as well as through narratives and memories circulating in the city, such as the stories and cultural memories of Montreal’s red light district in the 1950s, or the memory of a particular used-record store, such as the one Straw himself remembers in “Spectacles of Waste.” Thus, I will claim that retro can be productively understood as a circulation of things as well as of memory.

### **The retro shops on the Main**

Two remarkable clusters of retro shops are located in the Eastern part of Montreal, forming visible scenes of retro culture: retro clothing and objects on the hip “alternative main street” of Boulevard Saint-Laurent, and furniture and design in the more retracted Rue Amherst. These two groups show different kinds of retro practice, responding to different imagined pasts, corresponding to the aforementioned mythologies of the Montreal past.

Boulevard Saint-Laurent (“The Main”) hosts many retro-related shops along its length, with a concentration of the most pronounced shops door to door in the middle of the trendy Plateau area, such as Kitsch’n Swell, Rokokonut, Friperie St-Laurent and Cul-de-Sac Vintage, and the design shop Montrealité. St. Laurent is a lively “party street” with a historical multicultural flavour and a contemporary hipness associated with it. Thus it is not surprising that these shops are colourful, eye-catching, and accessible in their well-ordered display of goods, thereby aiming at an outgoing and casual audience, as well as dedicated connoisseurs. Some of the shops mainly sell clothing (and are locally called *Friperies*), whereas others are focused on design objects, accessories and all kinds of period pieces.

As an example of retro clothing shops, Friperie St. Laurent is a boutique offering men’s and women’s clothing equally. The oldest object, a black smoking jacket, dates from 1908, but the main supply dates from between the 1940s and the 1980s. The shop’s owner refers to 1950s

clothes as the most popular, even if they are hard to obtain from warehouses and markets in Montreal and Quebec, where they pick their supplies (they underline that they find all things themselves – and do not get them from third-party sellers).<sup>67</sup> The customers are collectors as well as casual *fashionistas*, often coming to Boulevard St. Laurent for the vintage shops. A Montreal guide describe the Friperie St. Laurent as “one of Montreal’s better known shopping destinations,”<sup>68</sup> and according to the owners, it was the first of the St. Laurent vintage clothing shops to open (in 1994). The market is described as being especially hot in the last five years as the number of shops in the street has increased. This has made the street come to be associated with retro and thus assume the character of a scene. The display of clothes is accompanied by period piece decorations, such as kitschy Canadian souvenirs. These are the typical aesthetics of the retro boutique, putting equal focus on fashion and connoisseurship. The decoration also expresses a local character, in which Quebecité is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. A remarkable presence is several men’s shirts still in factory packaging from textile factories that dominated this very area until only a few decades ago. A more exaggerated regional symbol is a robe (possibly from the 1950s) with the red and white maple leaves of the Canadian flag. In this manner, the shop seems characteristic of retro demand in general, but locally coloured pieces are remarkably conspicuous.

As an example of retro object shops, Rokokonut offers a more staged form of display. All kinds of objects, from clothing to lamps, glasses and souvenirs to vintage Playboy magazines, are for sale with no clear borders between the sales objects and the decoration. Leopard patterned tapestry and red lights provide the background for campy objects such as exotic fans, ballerina dolls, cocktail glasses, leather boots, handbags, and flowered dresses. The shop is characterized by the spectacular and exaggerated, with the exotic as a common denominator, highlighting the contrasts between the local rural kitsch and the Far-East or Polynesian exotic, the sexualized erotica of playboy magazines and religious kitsch such as Jesus pictures, boudoir kitsch belonging to a feminine universe and macho “stag” material. Here we are in the realm of a campy ironic retro that nevertheless cares for individual objects, which are all marked by a label of origin and date.

A similar approach is taken by the neighbouring Kitsch’n Swell shop (Ill. 33, p. 171), run by the same owners. It opened five years ago, and added Rokokonut two years later to create another retro universe to meet the current rising demand for their retro supply. Kitsch’n Swell has

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<sup>67</sup> Interviews carried out during research in Montreal November 2012.

<sup>68</sup> About Montreal vintage shopping guide: <http://montreal.about.com/od/montreal-vintage/a/friperie-st-laurent-vintage-montreal.htm> (accessed February 2014).

an interior of tree panels and a more conventional, homely kitsch style than the queer camp of Rokokonut. This universe is given a distinctively local character through objects such as a characteristic sign from Montreal beer Molson (which is described as very recognizable for Montreallers), Quebec number-plates, souvenirs from local sights, a wooden silhouette of Quebec, and more implicitly through locally popular fake-Indian woodcarvings, silk-paintings and Elvis-objects. Elvis has a notorious popularity in Quebec, already recognized in the *Elvis Gratton* TV and film series, (1981-) starring the eponymous and definitively *québécoise* Elvis impersonator (Marshall 2001). Reflecting this, Kitsch'n Swell offers Elvis as silk-painting, original 70's busts and, as an especially emblematic version, in fake wood, uniting many features of Quebec kitsch (Ill. 34, p. 172).

The owners (a couple who are dressed in retro clothing and obviously participate in the rockabilly scene, as seen in the *Rockabilly 514* movie) refer to the 1950s as the current trend, and the shop has seemingly visualized the current version of Fiftiesness. According to FASHION Magazine writer Ashley Joseph, the shop “feels like entering a 1950s time capsule, or maybe your grandparents’ Florida condo. The vibe is Rockabilly meets 50’s housewife, filled with Elvis memorabilia, rotary phones, fringe lamps, religious wall art, suitcases and old Mad Magazines.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the sister store Rokokonut “satisfies more feminine sensibilities with delicate lace gloves, gilded cigarette cases, vintage lingerie, and fur stoles aplenty – basically everything to make a Mad Men maniac go, well, mad.” This expresses the careful selection of components in the construction of a Fiftiesness image (again, even though *Mad Men* is set in the 1960s, it is easily identifiable with the “populuxe era” and the cultural Fifties described in the previous chapter), but also the presence of local objects and specific meanings in such a dedicated image. Accordingly, Kitsch and Swell has the slogan “Not made in China” placed on its façade to emphasize the provenance of its objects.

A different presence of local symbols in retro discourse becomes evident in the neighbouring design boutique Montrealité. It offers a selection of clothing, bags, and badges with motifs of modern Montreal icons, such as the Farine Five Roses sign (from the abandoned but still iconic flour factory by Montreal’s harbour), the Place Ville-Marie skyscraper, Habitat 67 and Buckminster-Fuller’s American pavilion from Expo 67. Another design is the downward-pointing arrow logo of the Montreal metro, turned 90 degrees to the left, now pointing backwards with

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<sup>69</sup> Evelyn Reid: “Montreal Vintage. Shopping the scene,” [http://montreal.about.com/od/montreal-vintage/ss/montreal-vintage-shopping-shops-stores-clothing-friperies\\_4.htm](http://montreal.about.com/od/montreal-vintage/ss/montreal-vintage-shopping-shops-stores-clothing-friperies_4.htm) (accessed February 2014).



Ill. 33: Kitsch'n Swell shop, Boulevard St-Laurent, Montreal. Photos from In the mood for trend blog.



Ill. 34: Elvis á la Quebec in fake wood and other locally connoting objects in the Kitsch'n Swell shop. Photo: Kristian Handberg.



‘Metro’ changed to ‘Retro’! Montrealité is run by five designers who started out by selling these things in other shops and fairs, but due to great demand, have now been able to open their own shop. The newly produced objects here are of course not old, authentic objects as in the neighbouring shops. Whereas these offer pieces from the actual past, Montrealité constructs idealized retro: what the past cannot actually offer. The badges and t-shirts recirculate images and collective memories of Montreal, making them symbols of distinction and a knowing alternative to banal souvenirs or megabrands.



**III.35: Badge designs from Montrealité. Photo: Kristian Handberg.**

Of course, Montrealité’s products to some degree possess a souvenir character, being accessible to the casual visitor (to the retro scene as well as to the city). And indeed the whole group of shops express accessibility and humour, making them available for a broader and casual audience. In addition, there are no signs of shops being excluded from connoisseur or subcultural circles, as the presence of stalls from the shops on the rockabilly scene and at vintage collector events, and posters in the shops, testify. Instead they seem to be the most visible flagships of a larger scene, which count many smaller fripperies and retro shops, especially in the Plateau area (one example being Retrocité, set up by a new distributor in a smaller, distantly located street). This indicates a resonance for retro circulation that fits well with the status of this area as a self-styled “alternative” quarter, “inscribing the alternative into location,” as Gregson and Crewe describe the preferred settings of retro boutiques. It is also in this geography that many retro-related events take place, such as concerts and fairs, showing the imbrication of the scene into local urban life.

With respect to the actual retro objects (which are carefully selected and displayed) on sale in the shops, I will conclude with two things. First, a presence of the exotic, kinky, quirky and kitschy elements of the past connoting an ironic connoisseurship today – associated with a younger,

outgoing audience, compared to the more restrained and expensive retro that is closer to conventional good taste, described in the following case on the shops in Rue Amherst. Second, the presence of local and regional connotations, from mass-produced woodcarvings to Farine Five Roses, as retro icons. This can be seen as an expression of the “cultural thickness of belonging,” in the regional differences in materialities of everyday commodities described by Löfgren (introduced in Chapter 2 and further discussed later). It gives meaning to the retro object when it connotes a Montreal or Quebec 1950s identity compared to simply *Fiftiesness* in a general, often more American way. This is, of course, also a way for the retro connoisseur to display distinction and knowingness. Still, the conscious “accent” in retro practice claims some kind of cultural belonging or at least historical consciousness in the ironic retro quoting.

Furthermore, I would argue that the choice of 1950s objects – with in one category a kitschy, rural homeliness (wooden tree objects, flowery dresses, religious objects) and in another a queer, burlesque seediness (old Playboy magazines, bar glasses, leopard-skin tapestry) – could be seen as setting up a symbolic universe corresponding to certain ideas of Montreal and Quebec’s past: the anti-modern rural Quebec and the vice city Montreal. Both these symbolic universes possess a definite otherness from the late modern present, making up a temporal district of exotic entertainment. In other words, the Montreal Fiftiesness contains the special elements of the kitschy homeliness of rural Quebec and the seedy vice of pre-modernized Montreal.

### **Selling Montreal Modern in Rue Amherst**

Rue Amherst is a street well into the Eastern part of town, an old working-class district that is still not considered gentrified, and located far from the usual shopping and sightseeing districts. During the last decade, this street has become a remarkable centre for expensive second-hand furniture, with around a dozen shops dedicated to selling second hand 20<sup>th</sup> century objects. The first shops opened around 20 years ago, and in the last five years, the market has been particularly hot for these modern antiquities, especially Scandinavian Modern-inspired design from the 1940s to the 1960s, often labelled “Mid-century modern.”

The furniture boutique Mtlmodern is typical of the aesthetics of this scene. Mtlmodern was founded in 2001 by a retro collector and presents itself as a “Montreal based resource of classic mid-20th century design.” The little shop is packed with pieces of furniture that are restored in the workshop at the back. The small shop’s focus is classic mid-century wood furniture: *The Chair* by Hans Wegner is expensively priced at \$1750 (Ill. 36, p. 175). The teak craze is even mirrored in the



**Ill. 36: Scandianvian Modern at PEI and Wegner's The Chair sold for 1750 \$ at Mtl Modern in rue Amherst.  
Photos: Kristian Handberg.**



**Ill. 37: Expo 67 memorabilia at Second Chance, Rue Amherst. Photo: Kristian Handberg.**

shop's emblem on its business cards, which has a teak surface, and the name of the shop indicates as special cohesion between Montreal and the 'modern style' that is proclaimed several times in the street.

A similar supply is found in PEI Mobilier Moderne 20e Siècle just around the corner, which was also started by a young retro design collector. The shop is set up in a carefully restored workshop with brick walls and a concrete floor. Antiques and Curiosa, which opened 12 years ago, presents a wide selection of teak furniture on its floor and a complimentary selection of lamps on the ceiling. Its owner confirms the interest in Danish Modern, and he is able to show original 1960s brochures from several Danish manufacturers. Next door, Cite Déco was among the first in the street, opening 20 years ago. It presents a smaller selection of pieces accompanied by artworks from the same period. According to its title and homepage, Cité Déco offers "vintage furniture from the 20's to 80's": a period that frames popular modernism, with an emphasis on mid-century Modern. Contrary to the cave-like darkness and colored lights in the St. Laurent shops, these shops are bright and spacious, creating a more exclusive focus on the objects.

The biggest among the shops is Jack's Objects et Mobiliers Modernes du XXe Siècle. The typography of the logo is grossly 1970s, and its supply accordingly involves more 1970s chrome and plastics, and less 1950s teak, including kitsch objects that could also be encountered in Kitsch'n Swell. When asked about popular objects, the shop's owner says that people often like to combine Scandinavian Modern pieces with other objects, like a 1970s lamp or an exotica object. Other shops indicate that retro furniture can be combined with contemporary elements far from cheap kitsch, for example in Re Design (co-operated with Cite Deco). Here, vintage furniture is displayed together with exclusive contemporary design and art, expressing a conventional, cultivated taste, rather than a bohemian alternative style.

And generally, the scene of shops in Rue Amherst express a reinterpretation of retro, from an ironic anti-fashion into a smooth and affluent fashion for a more well-off audience of connoisseurs with more money to invest in retro objects. The connection to a subcultural scene and an alternative, oppositional self-understanding is subdued here, compared to the shops at St-Laurent. As such, Rue Amherst states the new popularity of retro.

Besides this general tendency, however, the shops also display some specific characteristics oriented towards the local context. For example, Expo 67 has a remarkable presence on Rue Amherst. At Seconde Chance, a large selection of Expo 67 related objects form a special exhibition in the window display (Ill. 37, p. 174). The owner refers to all things Expo-related as

garnering huge interest from specialist collectors as well as a general retro audience, and quickly goes on to talk about the general importance of the Expo for Montreal: “Expo meant everything. The world came to Montreal and stayed there. Montrealers got a taste for foreign food and for modern design that instantly got popular. National retailers had to run a different selection of furniture in Quebec than in the rest of Canada because of the demand for modern design with bright orange shapes, and so on.”<sup>70</sup> There is also a selection of Expo 67 materials in le 1863, and here the owner also refers to the Expo as a key event. The modern designers came to Montreal, and the demand for the new look corresponded with the Quiet Revolution and the general feeling of the new in the 1960s with rock and counter-culture. The Expo featured a popular concert programme, which brought countercultural idols like Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead to Montreal, even though some student groups also protested against the exhibition. The other distributors in Rue Amherst refer to Expo 67 often and put any related objects on prominent display. It is obvious that Expo is a living and attractive memory site, nurtured by many kinds of objects in established collector fields like postcards and coins, as well as fashionable vintage objects such as a boomerang shaped ashtray. Expo 67 can be read as a pinnacle of the generally popular post-war modern. In this, it even manage to bridge the restrained Scandinavian Modern high modernism of the 1950s and early 1960s with the psychedelic and colourful style of the late 1960s and 1970s in the popular cultural association that feeds retro interest.

Expo is a symbol of the modern, cosmopolitan aspirations of Montreal and Quebec. The style for this modernization was consciously imported with Scandinavian Modern furniture. The owner of le 1863 claims Montreal to be one of the places in the world with the most Scandinavian Modern furniture around, gathering interest from buyers all over the world, dating the popularity of the style to the Expo years. A furniture shop named “Danish House” sold Danish design in a number of years after the Expo, and the Scandinavian furniture producers opened special facilities in Quebec.

The Scandinavian Modern style was generally popular in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, being a more restrained alternative to the futuristic “populuxe” style. It was popular among the “upper-middle-class part of the market,” allowing its buyers to “feel that they were modern and respectful of the achievements of their own time and were purchasing honest, well-made furniture” (Hine 1986, 80). But its extraordinary success in Quebec might be seen as

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<sup>70</sup> During my research I interviewed shop owners from all the mentioned shops in Rue Amherst, October and November 2012.

enshrining the small Northern European countries as role models, with the purpose of creating a brand of modernity for a smaller country. The Scandinavian Modern style also offered an alternative to Americanness that was seen as a threat to a vulgar and aggressive modernity. In any case, it is a distinct feature of the Montreal Sixtiesness that forms the symbolic universe for the shops in Rue Amherst.

The retro shops on Rue Amherst form a distinct cluster. With their aesthetic presentation and supply, the Rue Amherst shops can be identified as part of a scene of retro culture different to that of the St. Laurent shops. The scene here is centered and formed around popular modernist design, mainly from the 1950s and the 1960s. A specific relation between Montreal and modern design, especially Scandinavian Modern, is often expressed here, with Expo 67 in particular and the liberation of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s in general (including Montreal meeting the world, affluence, and humanistic ideals expressed in modernist design). This forms a symbolic universe, present in the individual objects for sale in the shops, which is remarkably different from the selection in the St-Laurent shops, which are more likely to point back to the more primitive sides of the past in the rural kitsch and the red light city of vice.

### **Markets and subcultures**

These visible presences bear witness to the current popularity of retro, which reaches beyond a small cult audience and an exchange of cheap anti-commodities. The shops in Rue Amherst in particular bear witness to retro's popularity among a new affluent audience and to the bigger investment in, and availability of, retro culture. This implies a different circulation of retro objects, bringing them into affluent homes and the more established categories of fashion and taste. In this way, they get closer to their original destination when they were newly-produced furniture in the 1960s aimed at the modern-oriented Quebec middle class. This is obviously a reorientation from the alternative cultural stance associated with retro. To use the terms of Bourdieu presented in Chapter 2, retro has moved into a new field (beyond those of subculture and popular culture) with a different logic, and steered by a different habitus.

Elsewhere in Montreal, retro culture orients itself towards a rough, working-class inspired Fiftiesness. Marina Vintage Style, a new shop in the east of town not far from Rue Amherst, not only sells newly produced 1940s and 1950s inspired dresses, but also offers styling and photographs in this image. The offered styles are "Vintage Classic (40s or 50s chic), Pinup (pencil skirt or short with high heels), Vintage style swimsuit, Sexy Retro Lingerie, etc!"

([www.marinavintagestyle.com](http://www.marinavintagestyle.com)), and the prices are high (300 \$ + for dresses and for photo sets). This creates a combination of availability and dedication, also recognized in the smaller Copenhagen shops described in the previous chapter. This retro is ready-to-wear, far from the D.I.Y. practice previously associated with retro style. At the same time, Marina Vintage Style expresses a demand to do retro profoundly: not just wearing any dress to connote the 1950s but exactly the right one – and to be professionally styled to wear it as well (Ill. 38, 180).

Marina Vintage Style is associated with the subcultural scene of rockabilly culture, which has a strong and dedicated following in Montreal. This scene makes itself visible in the city's cultural landscape through regular events and festivals such as the Red, Hot and Blue Rockabilly Weekend, and is portrayed in the feature documentary *Rockabilly 514* (Chica and Wafer, 2008). This movie follows the musicians (Bloodshot Bill, among others), festival organizers, car enthusiasts, burlesque dancers, and retro dealers through the scene's events (most notably, the annual Red, Hot and Blue Rockabilly Weekend festival in the Montreal area), and their daily civil life. Through this, it portrays the "work" invested in the subculture (as Hebdige noted), and the many kinds of objects and practices involved. The scene is not just formed around one cultural practice such as rockabilly music, but also around the circulation of objects, such as 1950s collectibles from cars to postcards, clothing – self-sewn, vintage, or bought at the Marina Vintage Style – bodily practices such as tattoos, dancing, and styling and make-up, and the preference for places in the city's geography which connote the 1950s, such as the Tiki bar Jardin Tiki or the Orange Julep diner. A scene event will typically involve stalls with retro objects and clothing, styling and make-up sessions, 1950s themed food and drinks, dancing lessons and burlesque performances, besides the music.

Accordingly, one typical event "Rock around the Broc" (October 2012), offers a day-time section of retro market, photography, styling, vintage car show and dancing lessons, and an evening section of concerts and dancing. The majority of the audience are dressed in 1950s and/or rockabilly style, clearly identifying with the subculture. Several of the St. Laurent retro shops such as Kitsch'n Swell are present with stalls, as well as the Marina Vintage shop, which offers styling and photo sessions. Like in the Kitsch'n Swell shop's supply, markedly feminine and masculine objects dominate. There are flowered dresses and accessories such as costumed jewelry for women, and vintage car merchandise, playboy magazines and leather jackets for men. There are even "vintage Playboy photos" on offer. The rockabilly subculture is known for staging these gender images but mainly in a stylized manner, not intending any affiliation to the gender roles of the

1950s (see Ekman 2007). The event is located in an old church hall deep in the Eastern Francophone part of town. Similarly, a concert with Bloodshot Bill takes place at La Sala Rossa, an old Hispanic community centre in the same area. As such, the events are inscribed into a local geography resonant with the images of the ruggish night club and churches' town of the 1950s.

These materializations of Fiftiesness all contribute to a symbolic universe and an image of the past. Like Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*, the material things, symbols, icons and stories, and practices, rituals and functions make up a unity. This is a desired image, "magical and affective," as Nora says, like the kinds of Fiftiesness developed through retro's history described in the previous chapter. But it is not just a thought image: it does indeed involve a lot of *things* and other physicalities like practices and places. Of course, these configurations of things are pieced together and selective, but they still do reflect certain specific conditions and ties to the cultural historical background of a place such as Montreal.

The retro shops in Montreal clearly do this through their location in the eastern part of town, i.e. in the Francophone working-class districts, as opposed to the wealthy Anglophone western part of town, or other parts of town dominated by other immigrant groups. These areas are laden with modern history, and in the remaining areas they connote something of the old working-class Montreal, even its colourful red-light nightlife. Retro fairs and festivals, and retro styled bars and cafes also inscribe themselves into this historically-laden context of Montrealité. Whether it is intentional or not, retro brings the recent past into current circulation with a degree of locality. This happens not least on a material level: there are local things in circulation, and culture is practiced in a specific geography. Thus, retro culture expresses the local modern culture and its distribution and translations of global signs.

In this manner, the retro practices correspond to Orvar Löfgren's observations on modern material culture. As described in Chapter 2, Löfgren points to how national and cultural specificities in modern culture are felt not in ingenious traditions, but in variations in the globally distributed culture. These differences create identity as "cultural thickenings of belonging," "embedded in the materialities of everyday life" and "in the national trajectories of commodities" (Löfgren 1997, 106). This is not a static condition, but develops through the distribution, import and translation of things. As a result, "nationalization and internationalization are not polarized developments but parallel and interdependent ones" (Löfgren 1997: 109). I would argue that retro reflects this very well: the cultural thickenings of belonging in the regional variations of the modern culture are an important and overlooked aspect of retro, and this may be seen in the examples from





Ill. 38: Styling photos from Marina Vintage Style ([www.marinavintagestyle.com](http://www.marinavintagestyle.com))



Ill. 39: Christian rock and “Maple syrup porn”: Covers of *Après Ski*, Pluton Records and *Résurrection*, Mucho Gusto Records.

Montreal. The constellation of retro objects found here would be different from the constellation of objects seen in Scandinavia or Great Britain, for instance.

Foreign influences are able to generate special local meanings and constitutively relay with modern identity. One example of a more exaggerated meaning of influence is the invasion of American popular culture in 1950s Montreal. According to sociologist Diane Pacom, “[a]cceptance of American influence by the urban working class doubled because of rejection of the rural masses and their traditional elites. The urban masses saw America’s influence as a tool of emancipation from the conservative ideological hold of that past. The rural masses and their elites, on the other hand, saw this as a negative, regressive influence that was evil, morally corrupt and, overall, dangerous to Quebec’s identity and cultural survivability.” (Pacom 2009: 441). Consciously or not, we may see the outspoken Americanité of the rockabilly universe as allied with the working-class Québécois, and both as opposing the officially promoted Québécois identity today that is still dominated by rural authenticity.

### **Retro as cultural memory in the city**

By expressing Americanness and urban Quebecity, the retro culture breaks with the officially promoted history and memory of Montreal. In *The City of Collective Memory* (1996) urban historian M. Christine Boyer marks a difference between cultural memory and official musealization, and asks, “how does the city become the locus of collective memory and not just simply an outdoor museum or a collection of historical districts?” (Boyer 1996, 16). Cultural memory is understood as multiple by Boyer, and created through the personal experience of the city:

As spectators, we travel through the city observing its architecture and constructed spaces, shifting contemporary scenes and reflections from the past until they thicken into a personalized vision. Our memory of the city is especially scenic and theatrical: we travel back in time through images that recall and bits and pieces of an earlier city, we project and these earlier representations forward into recomposed and unified stagings.

(Boyer 1996, p. 32)

The memory is the bygone element that we are able to make present, and it unites the past with the contemporary city. According to Boyer, the contemporary “postmodern” city is dominated by the unidirectional focus of “the art of selling [which] now dominates urban space, turning it into a new marketplace for architectural styles and fashionable lives” (Boyer 1996, 65). The spectacle is the dominating image of this cityscape, offering a continuous stream of “fatuous images and marvelous scenes” (ibid.). This also involves a past that is turned into contemporary consumption and booming musealization, as Huyssen has described. The collective memory, however, is still “an antimuseum” here and “not localizable, certainly not appealed to through revisionary historic and popular landscapes proposed in the City of Spectacle,” (Boyer 1996, 68). The collective memory has the position of a counter memory to the governing culture. It has the ability to go against the tide of ruling visions, and keep other things present.

This distinction might not be without its uncertainties and problems. Boyer refers to Halbwachs’ distinction between memory and history, which gives a very conventional and static version of history as institutionalized hegemonic knowledge. But history is not a univocal entity, and the museum could also be seen as giving focus to the dominated and forgotten sides of the past. For example, the historical museum Centre d’histoire de Montréal housed the temporary exhibition *Lost Neighborhoods/Quartiers disparus* in 2012, making the memory of the demolished working-class neighborhoods in Eastern Montreal present. At the time of writing, the museum had even opened a new exhibition on the Red-Light era in Montreal: *Scandal! Vice, Crime and Morality in Montreal, 1940-1960*,<sup>71</sup> signaling the importance of this period in the city’s history and a new will to musealize it. Many phenomena would also not be easy to identify as either entirely “spectacle” or “memory” in contemporary culture. For instance, the practices of retro would be seen as the “fatuous images and marvelous scenes” of the ruling postmodern culture in Fredric Jameson’s view. But, as it is my aim to show in this project, they could also be seen as alternative memories not identifiable with the popular landscapes of the City of Spectacle.

In 2012 Canada officially celebrated and commemorated the anniversary of the US-Canada war of 1812. This war was declared a founding and defining moment by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, which allegedly saw “Aboriginal peoples, local and volunteer militias, and English and French-speaking regiments fight together to save Canada from American invasion.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “*Scandal! Vice, Crime and Morality in Montreal, 1940-1960*, Centre D’Histoire de Montreal, November 2013-October 2015, [http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?\\_pageid=9077,118275570&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=9077,118275570&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)

<sup>72</sup> <http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1305743548294/1305743621243> (accessed February 2014).

Obviously, this distant past is promoted as a suitable *lieu de mémoire* in Canadian memory. But this commemoration was barely visible in Montreal and Quebec, suggesting a low interest and ability to inhabit this memory. Instead, the recent past is enthusiastically inhabited through retro culture suggesting a more credible connection to this era, one with a more alluring otherness attached to it.

### **Incredibly Strange Quebec**

An important part of retro's attraction is also pointing out the differences between the recent past and the present. "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there," as the famous line from L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1952) says, and retro generates the feeling of border-crossing into this country. The different country in the case of Montreal is often either the futuristic popular modernism of Expo 67, given expression in the imported Scandinavian modern, or the exotic early-modern Montreal of the "ruggish night club and churches town," with its provincialism and the emergence of American popular culture (rock n' roll and jazz, cars, exposé). To a certain degree, these universes correspond to the generally distributed, mainly US-American-inspired retro universes, such as the Fiftiesness described in the previous chapter. But I will argue that some special versions of Fiftiesness and Sixtiesness are added in the retro practices of Montreal. The "Red lights Fiftiesness" and the "Expo Modern Sixtiesness" are locally inspired meanings, which do not operate in the same way elsewhere. They are nurtured by a local presence and circulation of memories as well as of material objects.

There are also other examples of retro practices searching for Quebecois essences. For instance, the Montreal record label Mucho Gusto has specialized in reissuing special but characteristic obscurities of Quebecois rock. The most recent title is *Résurrection! Rock crétien et messes rythmées du Québec (1964-1978)* (Mucho Gusto Records 2012): a collection of religious rock recordings from Quebec – "Divine pop. Mambo psalms. Gogo masses," as the label presents it. These recordings would conventionally be far removed from the rock historical canon and any attention in hip rock discourse. They would rather be found in the repositories of cultural waste, described by Will Straw as the "final resting places" of "unwanted commodities" in the cheapest bargain bins with their pillage of "obsolete recording formats, failed or exhausted musical styles [...] old schoolbooks, interventions in long-concluded political debates, books from religious orders whose role within public life had faded, and landmark works from artistic careers now forgotten in their entirety" (Straw 2010, 209). As Straw observes, these spectacles of waste can be viewed as "museum-like repositories of Quebecois culture" (Straw 2010, 210), accumulating "a significant

portion of the postwar legacy in one place.” As described earlier, Quebecois culture has not been particularly valued, recognized or described. For example, the rock and pop history has almost solely focused on the Anglophone US/UK scenes. Therefore, Quebecois popular culture would be encountered here rather than in the organized displays of record boutiques, antique bookstores and in the musealizations of books, documentaries and exhibitions. But an elaborate and stylish reissue like *Résurrection* implies that Quebecité in modern culture is gaining attention and value.

“Religious pop” would conventionally unite two opposites of the ideal of modernist art: the restrictive and backwards Catholic church and the inauthentic kitsch of popular culture, especially in a translated and accented form like Quebecois. But here, it is presented to a knowing and style-conscious audience, encountered in the record boutiques of Montreal rather than in the churches of the Quebec village parishes, and it should of course be considered an object of musical retro culture. The cover features the title in a retro font and photos highlighting the unlikely combination of Catholic priests and nuns and rock instruments and psychedelic fashion – even uniting the emblem of the pope and a marihuana leaf. The accompanying essay by the compiler, radio host and rock historian Sébastien Desrosiers, presents the compilation as “a forgotten fringe in popular Quebec music history” (album cover notes), explains the cultural context, and provides the available information on these largely forgotten artists. The incentive, then, is historical as well as entertainment and aesthetic value. Desrosiers runs the blog Patrimoine PQ (<http://patrimoinepq.blogspot.dk/>), which covers 1960s and 1970s Quebec rock (“Revaloriser la scène musicale québécoise des décennies 60 & 70”) with detailed information on the province’s rock history. Again, the title “patrimoine” expresses the aim of taking care of a forgotten heritage in a discourse of musealization and cultural memory. Still, Christian rock is described as an “uncanny musical scene” (album notes), admitting the strange and obscure character of the material. In this way, it is inscribed into the retro category of Incredibly Strange Music described in the last chapter, where a forgotten and underappreciated kind of culture is staged and reterritorialized as an exotic other. And here, psychedelic church music would perfectly be “incredibly strange.”

Mucho Gusto Records has also released the series *Freak Out Total*, consisting of three volumes of Francophone Quebecois psychedelic rock, or as they present it, “an eclectic mix of 60s & 70s jello-psych-bubble-trashypop-hard-soft-rock”( <http://muchogustorecords.com/blog/albums-2/various-freak-out-total-vol-33/> ). Again, the focus here is on obscure, forgotten and locally accented interpretations of the genre, far removed from its supposed centres in San Francisco and London. This is also the case with Mucho Gusto’s reissues of artists, such as producer Jean-Pierre

Masseira (spanning from 1960's psychedelica to 1970's disco), and Les Maledictus Sound ("a strange creature assembled from a mishmash of diverse musical sounds... psychedelic pop, romantic ballads, musical tongue-in-cheek, drugged out chipmunks, near-delirium sound effects, horror movie screamadelia and a mega-twisted 60s vibe," <http://muchogustorecords.com/blog/albums-2/the-maledictus-sound/>). Another label in a similar vein is Le Disques Pluton (<http://lesdisquespluton.com/>) recently started by another music enthusiast, with the reissue of the soundtrack to the Quebecois soft-porn movie *Après-ski* (1971) as the latest release (Ill. 39, p. 180).

It should be stated that Mucho Gusto's vision of the "incredibly strange Quebec" is of course highly selective. It omits sincere attempts to incorporate regionally specific elements into a rock sound, such as the folk rock of the locally well-known group Harmonium. Still, it is based on the actual presence of the original records in the Montreal area, and its circulation of old records. Contrary to the previously predominant Anglophone basis of Montreal's rock historical scene (record shops, music researchers), Mucho Gusto is a mainly Francophone initiative, which is of course also the case with the French-only blog Patrimoine.pq. Where retro-oriented rock bands would previously sing in English, several of the prominent bands of Montreal's 1960s-inspired garage rock scene now sing in French such as Les Sequelles, Le Chelsea Beat, Les Breastfeeders, and Le Kid & les Marinellis. In the otherwise anglophile genres of "garage rock" and "mod," with their preferences for Swinging London iconography and Union Jack jackets, these band names are demonstratively French, in contrast to the actual 1960s, where bands worldwide were taking Anglophone names. A music video by Les Breastfeeders (the name itself an uneasy merging of French and English) shows the band in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, and the bands frequently tour France with pride. The previously mentioned video for "Danser sur ma tombe" is even filmed in a recreated "Scopitone" format: a video jukebox that was especially popular in France in the early 1960s.<sup>73</sup> The Scopitone and its primitive, cheap and colourful music videos are associated with yé-yé music: French beat music where *yeah-yeah* choruses known from the early Beatles songs get pronounced as "yé-yé." Yé-yé had a huge market in Quebec, through imported French music as well as locally produced versions, of course limited to the Francophone region of North America. For many years yé-yé was despised as an inauthentic low culture with no integrity. Especially in Québec, where it was considered an emblem of the inferiority of Quebecois culture.

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<sup>73</sup> <http://www.stim.com/Stim-x/9.4/scopitone/scopitone-09.4.html> (accessed February 2014).

The yé-yé records thus assumed the same kind of discarded fate as religious records, chansons, disco and other genres left in out-of-category sections of bargain bins and rest-stock shops.

In recent years yé-yé has been restored and moved from oblivion into special sections in trendy record boutiques. The owner of one of these record shops in Montreal has gathered a much sought-after compilation series of yé-yé girl groups (*Ultra Chics*, 1-6) and a compilation of Quebecois translated cover versions of 1960s rock. From being a marker of inauthenticity, yé-yé has become a marker of distinction and recognition, both regionally and internationally, recently resulting in an elaborate book by Jean-Manuelle Deluxe: *Yé-Yé! Girls of '60s French Pop* (Ferral House 2013).

In an article discussing the complex belonging of Quebec-produced disco music, Straw notes the deliberate obscuring of the origin of Quebecois disco productions, since this origin would hinder the success of the recordings even though Montreal had a prominent disco scene (Straw 2008). Instead, they were often camouflaged as European imports, although European disco was seen as inferior on the American market. Artefacts like Quebec disco records would have a stamp of “music from the wrong place” clinging to them, and be expected to be misunderstood and backwards. Recently, however, certain Quebec disco recordings have become sought-after in clubs, appearing on compilations such as *Unclassics: Obscure Electronic Funk and Disco 1975-1985* (Environ 2004), because of their obscure origin rather than in spite of it. Incidentally, disco as such has received a retro revaluing. Once perceived as unworthy compared to the acknowledged rock category, it is now being inscribed with authenticity and aesthetic value and given a musealization through reissues and studies.

Compared to the previously recognized retro universes in Montreal, the “incredibly strange” universe combines the seedy backwardness of the Red Lights Fifties with the futuristic Expo Sixties. It represents an increasing recognition of the previously disregarded Quebecité and the cultural practices originating farther away from the “Greenwich meridian” of the established cultural centres. Expressed in the terminology of materiality, Quebec cultural products, such as the disco records described by Straw, were *materialized* as non-Quebec products with anonymized origin, or even camouflaged as European imports. But now they get *positively* materialized as Quebec products. Similarly, retro practices such as the local rock groups’ active use of French materialize a Quebecité.

I will suggest that this remarkable cultivation of the local character of modern culture is motivated by a sense of belonging, as described by Löfgren, and by a sense of strangeness and

distance, making the local context an exotic Other. This is resonant with the described combination of nostalgia and irony clinging to retro, while the cultural history of the term also contains expressions of belonging with the past and alienation towards it.

The described retro practices coexist with a wide range of other historicizing and musealizing practices, spanning from official museums and governmental cultural manifestations to private memories and commemorations, and from mass media representations and commercial marketing to artistic representations of the past. Retro contributes to this by reflecting on what is remembered as modern, and attracts the present imagination as a founding background to our present condition and a historical Other to our present selves. Retro oscillates between these poles of connecting identification and distant exoticism with a fitting combination of nostalgia and irony.

## **Conclusion: Remembering the modern in Montreal**

The study of retro culture in Montreal shows a visible resonance with the mythologies of the modern past of Montreal, and a presence of local connotations that create a special accent in the retro specific to this place. The Boulevard Saint-Laurent shops and practices like the rockabilly culture tie themselves to the mythology of the 1950s past with its red lights, working-class neighborhoods, and local versions of *Americanité*, and the Amherst shops' use of 1960s modernism in the style of Scandinavian Modern creates an image of the more middle-class modernity of the years of Expo 67 and the Quiet Revolution. These are obviously formative and important stages in Montreal's history, present and actively circulated in the city's collective memory.

This modern era, however, is, not the primary object of the official history and museum culture, which rather focuses on events of the distant past such as the 1812 war, and does not, for instance, feature an Expo museum. In this way, this historical phase belongs to collective memory rather than to the museum, according to Boyer's distinction, and has not fully entered the formalized *cultural memory* according to Jan Assmann's model. Retro practices include the lowly regarded modern *Quebecité* and recognizes artifacts such as Yé-yé records, or even religious Yé-yé records, as authentic and distinct works. The previous "wrongness" attached to Quebec's cultural products, seen as having neither the high cultural status of Europe, nor the popular appeal of the USA, is turned into distinction, making them sought-after and valuable. I will suggest that this happens in an understanding of modern culture that corresponds to Löfgren's identification of



cultural belonging as created in variations in the globally distributed modern culture rather than in indigenous traditions. This includes material objects as well as memories that get circulated at different levels of scenes – some local and others more far-reaching.

The presence of retro culture in Montreal confirms the general popularity of retro in contemporary Western culture, and expresses its recent developments such as popular accessibility and thorough specialization. This implies a challenge of the borders between cultural categories such as subculture and commercial culture, and levels of value such as that between cheap anti-commodities and valuable prestige objects. The expensive retro furniture sold in Rue Amherst and the newly sewn 1950s dresses sold in Marina Vintage Style are examples of this.

But at the same time, the case shows retro as the primary representation of the postwar decades in the contemporary culture, and as a main objective in the search for the hard-to-identify yet heavily debated *Quebecité*. This should modify the perception of retro as a random and superficial re-selling of the past not sensible to specific contexts. Instead, retro reflects the combination of foreign and local provenance that characterizes the modern world, and how identity is created by its thing-world.

## Chapter 6: Ostalgie retro: On the Limits of Retrofication?

### Introduction

As described in the previous chapters, retro is a cultural practice based on the revival of cultural characteristics from a specific historical period dating mainly from 1945 to 1990. A historical and cultural feature of this period was the Cold War, with its separation of the West from the Eastern Bloc. The Iron Curtain split up the cultural development and produced differences in essentially all cultural forms. The favored genres of retro such as youth culture, popular design and media culture had completely different possibilities in the Soviet-dominated countries, and cultural exchange with the West was very restricted.

This changed radically with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the reunification of Germany (1990), the breakdown of the Soviet Union (1991), and the abolishment of the Warsaw Pact (1991). Now the political system, as well as the centrally planned culture and every-day life of the Eastern Bloc, was immediately abandoned, and the communist societies appeared as lost lands of the past. Obviously, this change in political and cultural circumstance formed a significant *then* and *now*, and implied a historicizing of the immediate past. It was repeated that “history is happening now,” and that “history is being written this very moment,” nearly compressing past and present together. The historical moment also inspired Francis Fukuyama’s notorious statement about the “The End of History” after the battle of the ideologies (Fukuyama 1992).

With the waves of border-crossers, collectors of Eastern Bloc artifacts almost immediately appeared, and a special retro interest in the characteristic appearance of these entirely different modern objects developed. This interest has continued and, especially in the last decade, it has gained an increased popularity often verbalized with the German neologism *Ostalgie* – “east-nostalgia” – as it has spread from a pure collection of things to a wide range of practices and cultural forms. Like other retro forms, the contemporary Ostalgie displays mainstream popularity as well inspiring dedicated specialization. This chapter analyzes Ostalgie retro as a significant variant of retro culture and an important, and somewhat overlooked, part of the memory culture concerned with Europe’s communist past. To approach this I will focus on the case of the GDR and especially the city of Berlin. The *retrofication* of the socialist past has been most accentuated and foremost

here, and the retro scenes (and the debates of the past in general) are accessible and comparable with other retro practices, since Berlin is a recognized hot spot for retro culture, as with Montreal in the previous chapter. Arguably the memorialization of the GDR has been tone-setting for the collective memory of the Soviet-dominated Europe and the state of *post-socialism*. This includes the official memory culture of truth commissions and national museums, as well as artistic representations such as filmic and literary works, and popular- and subcultural practices such as Ostalgie retro. It should be stated that each country formed a special case with different societal as well as cultural frames, and the unifying concept of the “Eastern Bloc” contained a vast territory over a long time span, naturally containing many experiences, memories and, indeed, *things*. It is not my aim to cover all the retro roles that the communist version of modernity has fed. For instance, I cannot include the Soviet nostalgia displayed by the *Nashi* youth political movement in Putin’s Russia, and I can only refer sporadically to retro practices in countries such as Romania (where I am only aware of a scene for locally produced “RomPop,” i.e. Romanian pop music from the 1970s and 1980s<sup>74</sup>).

Of course, such a seminal political and social reality as communism and its aftermath may create many cultural reactions that reach far beyond the reach of revival culture and this study. Thus, I will concentrate on what I consider to be relevant to a retro perspective, i.e. the cultivation of the Eastern Bloc past in contact with a retro self-understanding. There will often be many other aspects of the examples, also in the memory perspective, that I cannot cover. This is a study of how retro culture is practiced, not on the political and social reality in post-communist Europe. The chapter’s analysis will discuss various practices that revive the everyday thing-world and aesthetics of the GDR. This is mainly centered on Berlin as the “capital of Ostalgie,” with a few parallels drawn to other sites such as the historical Lutherstadt Wittenberg and the GDR industrial city Eisenhüttenstadt. The case of Berlin provides a parallel to the previous chapter’s analysis of Montreal and is once more a case of retro culture in a specific place. In this way, it shows how retro culture is a materialization of cultural memory, and how it responds to the specific context of a city like Berlin and its modern history.

First, I will present the concept of *Ostalgie* and shortly thereafter refer to the heated debate on memory of the GDR in the reunited Germany. To approach Ostalgie retro, the booming

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<sup>74</sup> See for example Disco Teca: <https://www.facebook.com/discROteca> (accessed March 2014) and the hip reissue of Romanian musician Rodion G.A. on the London-based dance label Strut Records (<http://strut.greedbag.com/buy/the-lost-tapes-16/>).

*musealization* of the GDR everyday culture across Eastern Germany in small and vernacular amateur museums as well as highly profiled official and private institutions is presented. As previously stated, it is my thesis that musealization is a central part of retro's practice, and here a remarkable overlap between the museal focus on GDR *things* and the retro interest in the GDR is observed. The GDR-focused retro culture in Berlin is analyzed through various kinds of retro markets and cultural practices, cultivating the specificity of the *different modernity* of the GDR. I will state that this recognition of another version of post-war modernity, which produces another material culture and other memories is the central and somewhat overlooked motivation for the current popularity of Ostalgie-retro, and characteristic of the specialization of current retro culture. In this also lies the special cultural memory of Ostalgie retro: it gives attention to a repressed memory of the everyday GDR thing-world and thus normalizes it, while simultaneously marking it as a mythologized image of imagined GDR-ness characterized by a distinct *Seventiesness* of orange plastics, concrete blocks, and political kitsch.

The case of Ostalgie retro challenges the usual borders of retro with its controversial cultivation of the everyday culture of what was, at least partially, a totalitarian state restricting its citizens and terrorizing its opponents. The different roles of Ostalgie, spanning from museum matter to personal identity, question the reach of retro, and how it is part of contemporary cultural processes. In this manner, the chapter provides a new perspective on retro and debates its means: what can be made retro and what should? Making the GDR's past present as retro is often met with criticism, either for being afraid of too little history or too much, and the commercializing and experience-making of history as being distorting. Here, I will show that the retro practices often offer a reflexive representation of the past, complementing the more established historical endeavors. Ostalgie retro is, I will suggest, a collective memory as well as a musealizing subculture.

### **Presentation of Ostalgie**

The first mention of GDR-nostalgia was arguably made by poet Günter Kunert. Already before 1989 he predicted that a possible breakdown of the SED state would be followed by a certain nostalgia. In 1993 *Süddeutsche Zeitung* announced the word "Ostalgie" as a candidate for "word of the year," even if it eventually had to settle for the title of the "most original word of the year."<sup>75</sup> Even though the term can be dated back to then, it first entered the authoritative dictionary Duden in

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<sup>75</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: 21.12.1993.

2004, expressing an unsettled status similar to the term retro. In Duden it is today defined as: “*Sehnsucht nach [bestimmten Lebensformen] der DDR*” (longing for [certain aspects] of life in the GDR).<sup>76</sup> Another definition from anthropologist Daphne Berdahl is the “popularizing of products, symbols and everyday culture of the GDR” (Berdahl 2010). As these proposed definitions suggest, Ostalgie refers to the more or less sincere longing and admiration for aspects of the GDR, as well as to a more distanced, even ironic cultivation of its characteristics. Obviously, it is the latter meaning that applies to the retro use of the term, and to this study. Often, however, Ostalgie is defined as forming a discourse that contains both meanings. In this way, the notion of Ostalgie has been surrounded by the embarrassment of being dangerously regressive, or at least merely superficial and frivolous, and lacking the necessary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering of the past), “eliding the questions of complicity, responsibility, and accountability in relation to a burdened GDR past” (Berdahl 1999, 205). In both of its meanings it in any case represents a status as “counter memory” to the officially promoted view on the GDR past.

The memory of the GDR is heavily contested in the German debate. It is regularly debated whether the GDR should be officially viewed as an *Unrechtsstaat* (illegitimate state), and if it is appropriate to equate the GDR regime with National Socialism as the “two German dictatorships.” But while the examination of the Nazi period largely started in the 1960s (in West Germany) after 15-20 years of persistent silence,<sup>77</sup> the GDR has been ransacked in the public debate immediately after the fall of the wall. A concrete case is the debate following the report of an official commission of historians for defining a site of memory and suggesting the memory sites of the GDR lead by liberal historian Martin Sabrow in 2005/2006 (the *Gedänkstättenkonzeption*, Clarke and Wölfel 2011, 9). The commission advocated a general historicization of the GDR, including depictions of its everyday life, not just representing the Berlin Wall and the Stasi. The report of the commission caused accusations of minimizing the crimes of the SED-dictatorship and of being a “light-version of the GDR” and “State-ordered Ostalgie” (Sabrow et al. 2007, 193). This reflects a political conflict between a) conservative politicians and commentators, who stressed the importance of disapproval of every aspect of the GDR, b) activists who were victims of the GDR regime, and who stressed oppression and the opposition against it, and c) the political Left and historians, who want to “encompass experiences of the everyday and the relative normality of life

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<sup>76</sup> Duden online edition: <http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Ostalgie> (accessed February 2014).

<sup>77</sup> Often, 1959 is seen as breaking with the silence with the publication of Günter Grass: *The Tin Drum*, but “1968” in West Germany is also seen as a generational confrontation of the post-Nazism silence.

under the SED rule, as well as placing the socialist dictatorship in the context of the Cold War” (Clarke and Wölfel 2011, 9). To this should be added the different perspectives of East Germans and West Germans and more local contexts, different generations, and other identities.

While the incentives for Ostalgie may differ and be blurred and ambiguous, it always concerns the recognizable and distinct *materializations* of the GDR and *GDRness*. Materiality and thingness are then very much at the center of Ostalgie. This is the case with the two main genres of Ostalgie identified by Berdahl as “the recuperation, (re)production, marketing, and merchandizing of GDR-products” and “the ‘museumfication’ of GDR everyday life” (Berdahl 1999, 192). The market and the museum are the two stages of Ostalgie, and commercialization and musealization are the processes by which it reworks the everyday culture of the recent past. In my study, I will claim that retro Ostalgie is more complex, and that the market and the musealization intervene with each other. As in other retro practices, many factors are combined, such as the territories of aesthetics, history and entertainment. But obviously Ostalgie as retro implies a controversy not encountered in Western retro, since it is based on the material of a possible “Unrechtsstat.” Ostalgie occurs as an insult in the debate, for example when the official report on GDR memory sites was attacked as being “state-ordered Ostalgie.” As Berdahl notes, Ostalgie has been perceived as an “embarrassing, irritating, puzzling, or, laughable” approach to history in the East and West alike.

At the same time, there is an acknowledgement of the neglect to recognize the everyday world of the GDR from the 1940s to 1980s in East Germany. As museum director Andreas Ludwig says, “[...] there is a clear gap between a somewhat official interpretation of the GDR within German history and the communicative memory of individual lives” (Ludwig 2011, 53). It would be obvious to locate the practices of Ostalgie in this gap. From the perspective of memory, it should be seen as the transition between communicative and cultural memory, as I will explain at the end of this chapter.

### **Musealizing the GDR from Rügen to Erzgebirge**

The GDR has become a very popular subject for museums in Eastern Germany and beyond, as there are several GDR museums in West Germany, and even a private museum on the Danish island

Langeland!<sup>78</sup> As Andreas Ludwig, the former director of the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR in Eisenhüttenstadt has noted, this museal wave can be seen as having been paradoxically anticipated by the efforts of the actual GDR museums to show the achievements of the GDR in exhibitions such as The Museum für Deutsche Geschichte's 1987 exhibition for the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Berlin, which included the very recent years in order to show the progress of the country and the final steps of the victory of socialism (Ludwig 2010, 39). However, the fall of the Berlin Wall brought a "sudden historicization of the GDR" (Ludwig 2010, 40), and made the *present futures* of the industry- and technology-praising republic symbols of a redundant and failed passé state.

A remarkable exhibition which presented a collection of consumer products from the GDR opened in a gallery near Frankfurt am Main in August 1989 and started the musealization of the GDR, even before the still unexpected disintegration of the GDR, which began a few months later. The curators Matthias Dietz and Christian Habernoll had gathered a collection of everyday objects in the GDR, and smuggled them out of the closed country, mirroring the extensive smuggling in of emblematic Western commodities such as jeans, pop records and candy to the East Germans. The exhibition was transformed into the book *SED Schönes Einheits Design* by Georg C. Bertsch and Ernst Hedler (Taschen 1990), supplied with purchases made in East Berlin immediately after the opening of the borders in an "urgent preservation action." This included photos of window displays and shop shelves to illustrate how the objects were presented *in situ* to the customers. According to the curators of the book and exhibition, the GDR appeared as the "Galapagos Islands of the Design World" (Bertsch and Hedler 1990, 7). A distinct character is attached to all the components of the country's thing-world from the "scratchy" electric shavers, "tinny" alarm clocks and "flimsy" and "soggy" binliners to the "disturbing brittleness" of the Stromfix Junior cable reel and "far too rubbery and primitive" pocket cameras. For the Westerner, the GDR objects "look clumsy and come with a built-in yesteryear quality," making them, so to speak, instant retro. It is a quality that causes a feeling of nostalgia and recall for the Western viewer: "East Germany has unwittingly preserved fossils of articles which, twenty or thirty years ago, were near and dear to us – in an era when marketing and sophisticated advertising were less important" (ibid.). The association of the GDR with the world of yesteryear was widespread. For instance, it is expressed in a novel by Christoph Hein, *Der fremde Freund* (1982), where a visiting *Wessie* describes his GDR

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<sup>78</sup> DDR Museum Langeland, <http://www.freewebsite-service.com/ddr/forside.php> (accessed February 2014).

fascination: “Here everything is like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wonderfully intact, like in a forgotten village.”<sup>79</sup> The recognition of the GDR as different and distinct was well established before 1989 in a *backwards discourse*, perceiving the GDR as an undeveloped and uniform society. This is of course in contrast to the self-image promoted in the GDR of an advanced industrial country participating in the Soviet space program.

The museum representation of the GDR and its recent but distant past started quickly, already a few years after the German unification, making it a special case of fast musealization. As Ludwig points out, this process has taken place at different levels and through different categories of museums, such as national museums, special museums, and collector’s museums. The national museums have tended to focus on the political history of the GDR and the official culture, for example with the Deutsches Historisches Museum’s special exhibitions on Germany in the Cold War in 1993 and art in the GDR in 1995. On the other hand, small, unofficial initiatives have been pioneering the recognition of the GDR everyday culture as worthy of preservation, and play a specific role in the museum landscape today. As Ludwig says, local communities and private collectors across the former GDR have been gathering everyday objects and have opened small exhibitions and vernacular museums in a popular movement reminiscent of the interest in the German past in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the early, nation-building phase of a united Germany.<sup>80</sup> Today, this nation building in reverse is reflected in a guide listing no less than 32 museums of “Der Alltag in der DDR” (*DDR-Museumsführer von Rügen bis zum Erzgebirge*). Such museums include the Ostalgie Kabinett in the village Langenweddingen near Magdeburg and the Museumsbaracke “Olle DDR” in Apolda near Erfurt. These are often run semi-officially, driven by amateurs and locally-based associations, rather than by professional expertise, and are often characterized by limited opening-hours and sparse communication. According to Ludwig, they “offer permanent presentations about all possible kinds of artefacts. Their touching but rather conglomerate appearance has to be seen in accordance with a general lack of academic interpretation” (Ludwig 2010, 44). Still, they form a remarkable subculture in the museum landscape, reflecting a profound interest in society for the experience of the GDR thing-world.

Ludwig’s own institution, the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (abbreviated DOK from now) was founded as a professional alternative to the private collection of the GDR everyday culture in 1993, making it the first GDR museum. It is significantly located in

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted and translated from Niels Barfoed: *Hotel Donau. Essay fra det andet Europa*, Gyldendal 1988, p. 144.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Andreas Ludwig conducted in Eisenhüttenstadt January 11, 2012.



Eisenhüttenstadt south of Frankfurt an der Oder, near the Polish Border. Formed around a large steel mill complex, this town was built from scratch as part of the GDR's first five-year plan in 1950. It was called StalinStadt until 1960, and was a widely promoted model city for the socialist life and its New Man (the educated socialist worker idealized in the communist ideology), where "*Stadt und Werk*" were always tied together. Its architectural layout shows the different official styles of the GDR, from the "National tradition" socialist realism with neoclassicist inspirations of the early 1950s, known from Berlin's Stalinallé (later Karl-Marx Strasse), to more functionalistic styles and *Plattenbau* later, making the town an open-air museum of GDR architecture and city planning.

The DOK was founded with a pronounced cultural memory incentive of preserving everyday culture and engaging the public in this process of selection (Ludwig 1994). It was necessary to act fast and get people to donate their old household commodities before they were destroyed and replaced by Western objects. Hereby, the "garbage phase" of the objects could be skipped (referring to Thompson's model). It was also evident that the memory of the GDR was split between an official memory focusing on the power structures, the legal consequences of the GDR, an abstract and intellectual discussion, and a private and socially founded memory based on subjective experience, everyday communication and things. The museum should compensate for the under-representation of the latter, and thus create a cultural memory for a city like Eisenhüttenstadt, not as a glorification of the GDR but as a documentation of its thing-world. As a museum, it was distinctly thing-based, examining things and their properties: How were they used? Did they work well? Were they important in everyday life? In this way, DOK detached itself from the more conventional museum's focus on rarities and seldom found objects, although still focusing on the core museal process of giving objects cultural value and qualities beyond their initial purpose and original context (Ludwig 2010, 40). This gives the museum a "double character," "moving in a field of tension between enlightenment and ideology, scientific distance and emotionality, intellect and affect, history and memory, as in the oppositional pair of Nora" (Ludwig 1994, 1154).<sup>81</sup>

The exhibitions of the DOK have presented aspects of "everyday life as well as social, cultural and economic history," where "[h]ousing, leisure and vacation, advertisement, consumption and consumer cooperatives have been topics, as well as dreams of the future, perceptions of the

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<sup>81</sup> "Man bewegt sich in einem Spannungsverhältnis von Aufklärung und Ideologie, von wissenschaftlicher Distanz und Emotionalität, Intellekt und Affekt, von Geschichte und Erinnerung, wie das Gegensatzpaar bei Nora heist," Ludwig 1994, 1154.



III. 40: Postcard from the 1950s when Eisenhüttenstadt was called Stalinstadt. Reprint by DOK.



III. 41: 1970s living room from Haus der Geschichte, Lutherstadt Wittenberg. Photo: Kristian Handberg.



III. 42: Exhibition view from Alltag in der DDR, Kulturbrauerei Berlin. Press photo, Stiftung Haus der Geschichte/Axel Thünker.

world through foreign literature, and photographic observations on the GDR” (Ludwig 2011, 49). As it appeared on my visit, the museum presents its exhibitions through a simple aesthetics of exhibition cases and informative displays, giving a serious if traditional presentation of the material. A special exhibition presented the design history of the GDR, giving a seldom seen serious design historical context to the objects, naming designers and referring the different directives for design in the centralized state. The display of typewriters, kitchenware, and design objects such as vases seemed to communicate the normality of the GDR everyday beyond the spectacular myths of the “Stasiland.” At the same time, particular circumstances of GDR product design were pointed out, such as the reliance on one standard model (there was just one wastepaper basket produced for decades in the whole country), and the regime’s changing priority of traditionalism and modernism. DOK’s exhibitions and research activities express an approach to the GDR as a *different modernity*, containing similar experiences to the Western post-WW2 development despite different contexts. At both sides of the Iron Curtain, the post WW2 era meant new things, materials, and designs – such as plastic typewriters and vacuum cleaners – and ideals as well as prosaic needs.

With its serious approach, the DOK distinguished itself from the general Ostalgie discourse and its more entertaining and aestheticized character. Still, it is dedicated to the same subject matter, and Ludwig admits that the museum is part of the popular and fashionable interest in the GDR-everyday. The location in the industrial city of Eisenhüttenstadt is of course far removed from the urban retro scenes, and it is also a question of how much the city wants to remember. In December 2012 the funding for the museum was cut, and its research activities have been stopped.<sup>82</sup> It has been announced that the museum is to be taken over by the city administration, and it is still in an uncertain state. Ludwig will continue his research activities at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam.<sup>83</sup>

### **Presenting the GDR every-day in Lutherstadt Wittenberg**

Another kind of musealization of the GDR everyday culture is found in the popular Haus der Geschichte in Lutherstadt Wittenberg. Contrary to the modern context of the newly built Eisenhüttenstadt, Wittenberg is famous for its historical sights, including the Luther-related sites of memory that are even incorporated into the city’s name as “Lutherstadt Wittenberg.” Haus der Geschichte is located centrally in the historical streets. It presents three floors of period-styled

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<sup>82</sup> <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/geschichte-die-ddr-geht-noch-mal-unter/7584016.html> (accessed February 2014)

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.zzf-pdm.de/site/924/default.aspx> (accessed February 2014).

rooms from the 1940s to the 1980s. The museum is run by a local community organization, and the exhibitions are presented through guided tours by local volunteers.<sup>84</sup> The museum (Ill. 41, p. 197) is based on the experience of entering authentic everyday rooms – living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms, complemented by communal facilities such as a kindergarten, a grocery store and a youth club. Although the rooms are set in different years with many emblematic period pieces, focus is given to the 1970s, which appears as the time at which the GDR was finally realized.

There is no written communication, but the guide explains the rooms with anecdotes and personal experiences. Again, the focus is on objects, such as the bad tasting Moccafex coffee, the big and inflammable Soviet-produced Raduga TV-set, and records with rock bands such as Karat and Puhdys. In this way, a familiar and homely atmosphere is created even if the background structures are not explained, and personal and anecdotal interpretations dominate. As a museum, the Haus der Geschichte could be described as “DDR-light” and Ostalgie-dominated, even if it does not formulate any pro-GDR views or ideological statements. Ostalgie souvenirs, such as card games and replica objects, are sold alongside historical toys and children’s books in the museum shop, underscoring the playful and lighthearted presentation of the matter. Locally based and driven, the exhibition could be seen as representing a claim to the civil history and collective memory of the period from 1945 to 1990, belonging not to the GDR state, but to the citizens of Wittenberg. Lutherstadt is a very different town from Stalinstadt, and promotes itself through its historical background. This includes the GDR everyday culture, which is featured in the city centre’s palette of historical experiences, even if in a comfortable and entertaining version. Wittenberg is open to the musealizations that Eisenhüttenstadt might even want to get rid of. In any case, the cities display different contexts for the exhibition of the GDR everyday culture, and different ways of presenting this material.

## **Berlin as Capital of Ostalgie**

Even if GDR everyday culture is explored at the local level in many provincial towns and villages, it is made visible and accessible in Berlin to the degree where Berlin earns the title of “Capital of Ostalgie” – not just of Germany but of the whole post-communist world. This status includes the institutions of official memory and history (even though there is not one official monument or

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<sup>84</sup> At my research visit in January 2012 the Haus der Geschichte could not offer an interview with the curators or directors, but offered the guided tour which, on the other hand, gave the authentic experience of the museum.

museum dedicated to the GDR yet), and the “Ostalgie industry” of souvenir sellers, theme bars, and Trabi Safaris. Arguably, Berlin is *the lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989) of the communist world and the Cold War, being the prime association and mapping of this historical territory in the collective memory. The most iconic images are from here (such as soldiers at the Check Point Charlie, the bricked up Brandenburger Tor, and of course the fall of the Wall in 1989), the most well-known fictions are set here (films such as *Good Bye Lenin* (2003) and *The Lives of Others* (2006)), and key political moments are related to Berlin, such as John F. Kennedy’s famous 1963 speech. Indeed, Berlin has the character of a memory city. As geographer Karen E. Till has analyzed it:

Berlin’s materiality is haunted by past visions for the future and contemporary desires for the past. It is a city where temporalities collide in unexpected ways through the actions of individuals and groups – living, deceased, and not yet born – as they make places in their search for what it means to be German. [...] Modern Berlin, as a concept and a place, is simultaneously haunted by past and future lives and presences, and shaped by the tourist gaze [...]

(Till 2005, p. 194)

This reflects that official memory culture, the search for identity of various groups, and the tourists’ more leisure and experience-based use of the past meet and sometimes collide here. Also, Huyssen has described Berlin as especially marked by its past: “There is perhaps no other major Western city that bears the marks of twentieth-century history as intensely and self-consciously as Berlin” (Huyssen 1997, 59). Using the image of the city as text, Berlin’s *city text* has been “written, erased, and rewritten throughout this violent century [the 20<sup>th</sup>], and its legibility relies as much on visible markers of built space as on images and memories repressed and ruptured by traumatic events” (ibid.). Since Huyssen’s writing in 1997 in the turbulent rebuilding phase (where the city was “enormously exiting for people interested in architecture and urban transformation, but for most others mainly an insufferable mess of dirt, noise and traffic jams” (ibid.)), many of the traumatic memories have been given a formal representation. Berlin even has its own famous “memory district” of mega-manifestations of memory, such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (*Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*) and The Topography of Terror (*Topographie des Terrors*) museum at the site of the Gestapo and SS headquarters. Somewhat controversially, the “memory district” is also the site of the popular *Trabi Safaris*, where the legendary GDR car is

rented for guided tours, and Checkpoint Charlie with its crowds of souvenir sellers and Cold War-themed living statues are right nearby.

Berlin's memory status has been tied to the troubled heritage of Nazism and the Holocaust. The well-documented cases of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (inaugurated 2005) and the Jewish Museum Berlin (*Jüdisches Museum Berlin*, inaugurated 2001) are among the main manifestations of the memorialization of the Holocaust: the most emblematic and formative discourse of cultural memory of all, which has become a model for all memory issues and gained a status as "cosmopolitan memory" (Levy and Sznajder 2006), transcending ethnic and national boundaries. This also includes the memory of the GDR. As mentioned above, it is a long-lasting debate as to whether the GDR was an "*Unrechtsstaat*" like the Nazi regime, or how far the "two German dictatorships" are comparable. These are of course questions beyond the scope of this project, but it should be noted that the memorialization of the GDR follows in the aftermath of the seminal memory debates of the atrocities of the Third Reich.

Compared to the big-scale memorials and museums about the Nazi epoch that have been inaugurated in the New Berlin, with its status as the German capital, official monuments and museums have yet been made for the GDR. Even though there has not been the traumatic repression and decades of persistent silence that characterized the post-war period of the Nazi-regime, the GDR past in Berlin has been treated with a "willful forgetting" (Huyssen 1997, 60) and an active deselection, for example in the renaming of streets, dismantling of monuments, and the demolition of the GDR Palace of the Republic (*Palast der Republik*) to make room for a rebuilding of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Berlin Stadtschloss. To a certain degree, the memory of the GDR has been a counter culture, practiced by an unlikely fellowship of private entrepreneurs, NGOs, vendors, and memory activists.

This is reflected in the GDR museums of Berlin. The declared *DDR Museum* is a privately founded museum which opened in 2006. It is situated at cellar level by the Spree River, facing the Museumsinsel near the site of the former Palast der Republik. It is the declared mission of the museum to tell the story of the GDR, focusing on people's experiences, "way beyond a bare listing of the historical facts,"<sup>85</sup> and with a slogan of "Hands-on History" ("*Geschichte zum anfassen*") as "Berlin's Interactive Museum." The text first presented at the exhibition promised "a

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<sup>85</sup> "[...]weit über eine reine Aufzählung der historischen Fakten hinaus," Hintergründe zum DDR Museum, <http://www.ddr-museum.de/de/museum> (accessed February 2014).

hands-on experience” and unforgettable stories of the GDR as it really was.<sup>86</sup> This hands-on experience included the opportunity to climb into a Trabi and drive through a simulated East Berlin (Ill. 45, p. 204), and sitting at a party officer’s desk, receiving calls from Moscow. The more usual displays are also made “interactive” through drawers, push-buttons and other gimmicks. The exhibition of the DDR Museum covers many aspects of the GDR from everyday culture to political history.

The DDR Museum could be described as an all-around museum with an introductory character, using anecdotes and the staging of iconic objects. Contrary to many other GDR museums, either recreating the feel of entering rooms (as Haus der Geschichte in Wittenberg) or being located in authentic environments (such as the DOK in Eisenhüttenstadt or the Gedächtnisstätte Normannenstrasse in the former Stasi headquarters), there is no specific atmosphere created here. Instead, the central and accessible location seems to be important for the museum. A GDR restaurant (DDR Restaurant Domklaus) is connected to the museum, offering GDR-associated food (it opened as the restaurant in the Palasthotel in 1980). Being well advertised and visited by over 500 000 guests in 2013<sup>87</sup> the museum is popular. The statistics published by the museum also show that 2/3 of the visitors are under 40, 23 % are from the former GDR, 43 % from the former BRD, and the remaining 35 % from abroad. Thus, the DDR museum’s audience could be described as young, international and, supposedly, with a casual interest in the subject.

Recently, a more official museum representation of the GDR everyday has been inaugurated with the exhibition *Alltag in der DDR*, which opened in November 2013 at the Kulturbrauerei in the Berlin district Prenzlauer Berg. This permanent exhibition is presented by the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, a national organization dedicated to presenting German history since 1945,<sup>88</sup> which runs the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn and the Zeitgeschichtliche Forum in Leipzig. The before mentioned *Gedächtnistettenskonzeption*, which recommended how to represent the GDR, is stated as a background for the exhibition, which is intended to “keep the memory of the communist dictatorship on German soil alive as well as

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<sup>86</sup> In my research it was not possible to meet the curators of the museum. It is analyzed through the usual visitor experience and materials published by the museum.

<sup>87</sup> DDR Museum’s own statistics, <http://www.ddr-museum.de/de/presse/statistiken> (accessed February 2014).

<sup>88</sup> Started by a declaration by Bundeskanzler Helmut Kohl to build “eine Sammlung zur Deutsche Geschichte seit 1945” in 1982. This goal was met in 1994 with the Bonn museum and in 1999 with the Leipzig museum. (Museumsmagazin Stiftung Haus der Deutsche Geschichte 4. 2013, 38).

promote awareness of historical contexts.”<sup>89</sup> In this manner, the exhibition obviously has a serious agenda, differentiating it from the experience-based DDR-Museum, but still with a focus on everyday culture. The exhibition presents life in the GDR as one of contradiction, with a primary focus on the gap between the ideological demands of the SED-regime (“SED-Herrschaft” is the consequently used term) and the real life-world of the people. It is set in two parts: one focuses on the private lives of GDR citizens and the other on their work-lives. In the part on spare time, the product culture of the GDR is presented from a consumer’s perspective. Where the retro shops (as later exemplified) and many of the small *Wunderkammer*-like museums present an abundance of GDR articles, stacked from floor to ceiling, the exhibition contrasts this with scarcity and limited supply. For example, goods such as tin food were frequently sent out with minimal emergency labels due to a lack of print colors. The exhibition presents small objects as well as bigger objects (a newsstand and the World’s most humble auto camper: a Trabant car with a tent on the roof!). Everything is consistently communicated and presents different aspects of the private life. Similarly, the section on workspace (focused mainly on industry work) reflects on the rather different work-life in the GDR with its worker’s brigades, social and cultural organizations at the workplace, and of course heavy propaganda in contrast to run-down realities.

This new exhibition is obviously a drive for the official musealization of the GDR. It presents everyday culture with an emphasis on the complexities and different aspects of the period. Through its exhibitions it underscores the oppression of the SED-regime, as well as the experiences of daily life. In this way, it acts as a bridge between the commemorative sites, such as former Stasi prisons, and the more light-hearted private Ostalgie collections and small museums. Its location in Prenzlauer Berg is retracted from the high street of tourism, but located close to many of the retro shops and retro themed cafés in the bohemian area. As discussed later, the exhibition inscribes itself into a retro Ostalgie geography, maybe as a conscious supplement, or even counterpart, to the retro distribution of the GDR here.

### **Selling and collecting the GDR**

The interest in the GDR reaches way beyond the museum and its delimited space for the past. The museum perform one type of musealization, described by Ludwig as the process by which “artefacts undergo a distinct change from objects of daily use to objects of cultural value [...]

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<sup>89</sup> “die Erinnerung an die kommunistische Diktatur auf deutschen Boden wachzuhalten sowie das Bewusstsein für historische Zusammenhänge zu fördern” (Museumsmagasin Stiftung Haus der Deutsche Geschichte 4. 2013, 3).





**Ill. 43: Trabi Tours in Berlin 2012. Photo: Kristian Handberg.**



**Ill. 44: Interior from Ostel. Das DDR Hostel. Photo: Ostel.**



**Ill. 45: “Geschichte zum anfassen” at DDR Museum. Press photo/DDR Museum 2012.**

bestowing on them a quality beyond their initial purpose and context” (Ludwig 2011, 40). This is what happens when everyday objects such as GDR-produced tampons or egg cups get exhibited as museum objects. But as Lübke and Huyssen claim (and as mentioned in Chapter 3), musealization also describes the way in which the past and the collecting and exhibition logic of the museum enters all areas of our everyday lives. I have suggested that this is a fundamental aspect of retro, and of the inclusion of the recent past in the everyday and individual styling. In the memory and history boom of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the past has widely been given roles beyond traditional institutions of history like museums. An example of this is the use of the GDR in contemporary Berlin.

As an eye-catching – and according to some controversial – example of Ostalgie entrepreneurship is Ostel Das DDR Design Hostel (Ill. 44, p. 204 and front page), which offers accommodation in GDR-themed settings in an East Berlin *Plattenbau* with authentic GDR furniture and décor – even including portraits of Erich Honecker on the wall. The Ostel opened in 2007 and originally presented options such as the “Stasi Suite” (with authentic furniture available for Stasi officers) or a bunk bed in the “Pionierlager.” The furniture, such as the “Karat” wall-wardrobe and the multi-function table (the “Mu-fu-ti” that plays an important role in Thomas Brussig’s popular novel *Am kürzeren ende der Sonnenallé* (1999)), is described as “original furniture from the VEB-Möbel-Kombinat Hellerau and horribly patterned tapestry in brown orange and pea-green.”<sup>90</sup> For the comfort of the visitors (who are offered “A night in GDR Horror for 9 Euros,”<sup>91</sup> according to the newspaper BZ) the authentic signature pieces have been complemented with contemporary IKEA furniture, and the Ostel offers a GDR styled contemporary hostel experience rather than an authentic total experience. To complete this experience, a GDR themed restaurant is associated with the Ostel: *Das Design Restaurant “Volkskammer”* (<http://www.volkskammer.de/>).

Ostel is fitted into a 1970s GDR *Plattenbau* building near the iconic Karl-Marx Allee in a typical East Berlin geography. As a hostel it is of course aimed at tourists, and as mentioned, it is themed rather than recreating an authentic experience. It is advertised and popular, and, as the *Trabi* outside suggests, it is an easily recognizable version of the GDR that is presented. It does not center on a specific sphere such as the home (like the museum in Wittenberg), the administration (like the Gedächtnisstätte Normannenstrasse), or, an actual GDR hotel. Offering GDR-themed

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<sup>90</sup> <http://www.ostel.eu/> and <http://www.bz-berlin.de/archiv/eine-nacht-ddr-grusel-ab-9-euro-article329278.html> (accessed February 2014).

<sup>91</sup> BZ Berlin, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007, <http://www.bz-berlin.de/archiv/eine-nacht-ddr-grusel-ab-9-euro-article329278.html> (accessed February 2014).

accommodation, the Ostel represents a culmination of the popular and commercial experience-making of the GDR. After its opening it was criticized by GDR victims' organizations such as Union der Opferverbände kommunistischer Gewaltherrschaft (UOKG) as an insult to all of those who actually experienced Stasi's prison cellars.<sup>92</sup> According to the hostel's owners, Daniel Helbig and Guido Sand (formerly artists of the DDR Staatszirkus), the aim is not to provoke or insult anybody, but to make a "gag" and create a fun holiday experience. Thus, the title of the "Stasi-suite" was abandoned. This is an obvious example of the controversy that Ostalgie causes – many would never like to spend a night at the Ostel, seeing it as an amoralization of a still recent past, too serious to play with, and sell, in this cheerful way.

There is no clear historical incentive for the Ostel, but it has been involved in GDR-historical activities. For example, the Ostel and its two owners initiated and financed the exhibition *Volkseigentum: Kunst in der DDR 1949-1989* in Berlin in 2008. This exhibition of formerly State-owned artworks, now stored away in an archive in Beeskow outside of Berlin, was presented outside of the official museum world in a former GDR furniture showroom. The exhibition presented the personal choices of Helbig and Sand based on the criteria of "[w]hich art do we associate with the GDR today" (Tippach-Schneider in the exhibition catalogue, 15). In this manner, it can be seen as dealing with the cultural memory of the GDR, rather than being an art-historical investigation of GDR art. The exhibition is an example of the unofficial musealization of GDR material (which the official art museums only occasionally exhibit<sup>93</sup>) and which does arguably inscribe itself into the Ostalgie retro category, mixing the aesthetic, the historical, and entertainment.

GDR-themed experiences in Berlin also include the famous *Trabi Safari* (Ill. 43, p. 204), offering guided tours in the iconic GDR car through West as well as East Berlin. This is, of course, on the popular and accessible end of the scale, not having the knowingness and investment in authenticity usually attributed to retro. The cars are painted in colorful designs, far from their original appearance, and the guided tours present the most well-known sides of the town. The tours start near the very touristy Checkpoint Charlie, where souvenir sellers highlight the most easily recognizable symbols of the Cold War. As such, the Trabi Safari is placed in a geography of mass-tourism. This is of course contrasted by the choice of location of the retro shops in areas like

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<sup>92</sup> "Hostel im DDR-Look: Stasi-Opfer protestieren gegen "Ostel"," Spiegel Online August 10th, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/reise/aktuell/hostel-im-ddr-look-stasi-opfer-protestieren-gegen-ostel-a-499304.html> (accessed February 2014).

<sup>93</sup> Recently, and maybe provoked by the *Volkseigentum* exhibition, some museums have included the GDR art in exhibitions such as "Der Geteilte Himmel. 1945-1968" at Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2011-12), and "Bilder machen Schule. Kunstwerke aus DDR-Schulbüchern," Kunsthalle Rostock 2014.

Prenzlauer Berg, Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg. Berlin is widely recognized as a hotspot for retro shopping. For example, the Swedish magazine *Hus & Hem Retro* (now, *Scandinavian Retro*) describes Berlin as “the Swedish retro-traveller’s new favorite city” (*Hus & Hem Retro* 4. 2013, 78), and guided tours to the best vintage shops (after your own choice of favorite period style) can even be bought!<sup>94</sup>

Like Montreal, Berlin is obviously a town recognized for its many retro scenes, and GDR Ostalgie is a prominent feature in this. Of course, not all of Berlin’s retro cultures are concerned with Ostalgie. Also, the way in which the retro objects are staged as Ostalgie varies a lot across the Berlin retro scenescape. In some places the Ostalgie character is made the visible center of the shop’s image and retro universe, for instance in the shops “VEB Orange” and “Stiefelkombinat,” with their GDR-connoting names. Elsewhere it is subdued, and the GDR objects are not distinguished from the rest of the retro objects. Thus, Ostalgie is not an exclusive scene delimited from the rest of the retro culture and market. It is rather present across the retro universe of Berlin. Because of this, Ostalgie retro should be distinguished from the identity that Ostalgie proper is also associated with, for example in political fractions and local communities, who sincerely ally themselves with the GDR. There is also an aspect of generationality, since Ostalgie retro is associated with a younger generation without adult memories of the GDR<sup>95</sup>. A distinctly different set of cultural practices are associated with the older generation of actual citizens of the GDR, such as popular oldies concerts with GDR pop stars (currently, three of the biggest GDR rock bands are on a multi-date Rock Legenden tour across East Germany<sup>96</sup>), and the magazine *Super Illu*: a weekly magazine aimed at the citizens of the eastern Bundesländer with (apolitical) local issues and features on GDR celebrities (published by the West German Burda publishing house, see: [www.superillu.de](http://www.superillu.de)).

As these and the following examples will show, there are borderlines and complicated cases. My examination brings together material usually associated with retro culture (such as the retro shops) with museal practices, in order to show the significantly similar efforts in materializing

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<sup>94</sup> <http://vintageberlinguide.com/berlin-vintage-tours/> (accessed February 2014).

<sup>95</sup> The youth and children’s perspective on the dissolution of the GDR is the subject of Jana Hensel’s popular book *Zonenkinder* (2002, English edition: *After the Wall*, 2004). Here, Hensel (who was 12 years in 1989) describes her generation’s experience of having a childhood in one country and being teenager in another one, and, like the Ostalgie retro, refers to the material and popular culture rather than political and social issues.

<sup>96</sup> <http://www.eventim.de/rock-legenden-Tickets.html?affiliate=EVE&doc=artistPages/tickets&fun=artist&action=tickets&kuid=467726> (accessed February 2014).

the GDR everyday world, and the new aesthetic and historical interest invested in these objects. This expresses the role of retro as representing the past and contributing to the cultural memory in an overlooked but important way, but also how retro challenges its own field as well as other territories.

### **Shops: VEB Orange and Stiefelkombinat**

The street Oderberger Strasse in Prenzlauer Berg is the site of many retro shops. Among these is VEB Orange ([www.veborange.de](http://www.veborange.de)) (Ill. 45, p. 20). It is a popular shop, acknowledged in several guides to retro shopping in Berlin, and recommended as an attraction in it-self, as a “Dauerausstellung” (“permanent exhibition”) (Printz Berlin) and “Viva retro!” (Lonely Planet). The shop’s name refers to the emblematic GDR term “Volkseigener Betrieb” (people’s-owned company), which was the title of the common form of state-owned industries and enterprises such as “VEB Automobilwerk Eisenach” (which produced the Wartburg car) or “VEB DEFA Kopierwerke” (which took care of all film production in the GDR). As such, the names of the production sites of the GDR objects is adapted for the scene where they are commercially revived, and where they are re-produced as retro. The “Orange” obviously stems from the lively color of the shop’s most popular objects, such as orange plastics kitchen-wear and lamps.

From the outdoor display and the entrance door, the GDR presence is prominent. The shop’s logo on the door depicts a chicken-shaped egg-cup (model “Sonja Plastik K03”), which is one of the most beloved GDR retro objects (of course in orange plastics), and a border sign pointing towards “DDR” stands by the door. The door is framed by the national emblem of the GDR as an authoritative symbol of the state and, in a similar shape, round bathroom mirrors from the 1970s from the private sphere. This sets up two poles of the imagined GDR: the iconography of the state and the cheap, kitschy everyday design. Both are able to feed the current fantasy of a different world in the recent past, and their combination forms an ironic contrast of totalitarian power and humble everyday aesthetics. The window exhibitions also counter-pose these poles by uniting objects of ideology, such as FDJ-emblems and uniforms with toys, radios, and other leisure objects. Inside, the shop is packed with a carefully stacked abundance of retro objects. The vast supply is partly categorized with departments for small toys, figurines, clothing (a comparatively small section), décor objects, and a whole second room dedicated to kitchen-wear, consumer products, and vintage daily utensils. There are also more thematized sections such as Berlin-related objects or rural kitsch of stag horns and miniature cottages. The shop features special collector’s objects such

as postcards, figurines, and photo equipment, and design objects such as lamps and furniture for display. Accordingly, the shop is aimed at collectors as well as customers of retro fashion. And similarly, the shop's supply is presented in displays miming the systematically ordered collection as well as the aestheticized tableau. As found earlier in this study, this is one of the typical aesthetics of the retro shop and of retro aesthetics as such.



**III. 45: VEB Orange: Display of orange kitchen-ware and of Berlin souvenirs. Photos: Kristian Handberg 2014.**



**III. 46: VEB Orange from the outside. Photos: Kristian Handberg 2014.**

Among the centerpieces of the shop are two displays in the inner kitchen-room. One contains various GDR groceries and household staples, mostly in their original packaging. Many of the items are not for sale, since they are too rare and maybe beyond their sellable state. This displays the brands of the GDR such as Spee washing powder, and usually trivial objects such as washing-up brushes and paper bins now being musealized as rarities. This multicolored display is contrasted by a big collection of orange kitchenware placed on a 1970s kitchen cupboard. Being popular sales objects, the formerly despised plastics of bowls, trays, and the famous egg-cups are here stacked as the heart of VEB Orange. A sign of “Kunsthandwerk und Kunstgetriebe aus der DDR” in the middle comments on these previously trivial mass products, which have now become aestheticized. Even a hand mixer in orange plastics is referred to as a seller by the present shop assistant. Apart from the kitchenware, the colorful lamps all hanging from the ceiling are pointed out as currently popular objects. With their big bulb-like forms and yellow, red, orange and brown colors, these lamps are also from the 1970s and associated with a *Seventiesness*: a chronological focus throughout the shop.

The Sonja eggcup is made of thin plastics, far removed from the traditional idea of a good crafted object. With its figural form it differs from the functionalist aesthetics of modernism too. It obviously evokes the “flimsy” feel of otherness attached to it, compared to many Western household products such as the popular Rosti melamine bowls from the same era. As an industrial plastic object it stems from the chemical industry in the GDR, which from 1958 was promoted as an emblematic feature of the country through slogans such as “Chemie gibt Brot – Wohlstand – Schönheit.”<sup>97</sup> Like the mine worker, the chemical worker was idealized in GDR society and even given special cities like “Chemiearbeiterstadt” Halle Neustadt, built in the 1960s and 1970s. This industry and its satellite-cities have since become symbols of the dysfunctional GDR and its failed aesthetics. As a retro object, the Sonja eggcup symbolizes the humble private life in the GDR as well as the industrial culture. It is a recognizable object, which was popular and long in production, and is thus possible to find in original editions. It is still being produced as a classic object from the manufacturer Willibald Böhm GmbH (previously “VEB Plasten und Chemie Volkenstein”) (see: [www.sonja-plastic.de](http://www.sonja-plastic.de)), and is often present at the Ostalgie market. The VEB Orange only sells the original vintage copies, to underscore its authenticity.

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<sup>97</sup> For example, see feature on the GDR plastics industry on the online museum Wirtschaftswundermuseum: <http://www.wirtschaftswundermuseum.de/plaste.html> (accessed March 2014).



Not everything in the shop is GDR-produced, but only a few things are from outside of Germany. Many objects have local meanings, such as vintage souvenirs (several plastic models of the Berlin TV tower), local ads, and books on Berlin. Books, such as a newly published guide to *Plattenbau* (precast construction blocks) in Berlin, are for sale, giving architectural attention to this much despised architectural heritage. This musealizing interest is mirrored in the shop's obvious museum character: VEB Orange appears as a display for study and experience rather than for sale (even though it is a commercial shop, after all). The shop's webpage even features a museum section presenting photos of GDR posters and series of private photos from GDR everyday life sent in by various contributors. This is done in line with the museum rhetoric of presenting "valuable time documents" for "remembering the history of the GDR through the everyday objects" (<http://veborange.de/museum.html>). The images here, and of course the objects in the shop, are given museum value beyond their original purpose as everyday functional objects. They are reinvested with value and authenticity after an often turbulent "garbage phase" after 1989. Asked about the origins of the objects, it is stated that the shop itself collects its material, in the Berlin area as well as Thüringen and Saxony, where GDR objects are still easily obtained.<sup>98</sup>

VEB Orange opened 9 years ago and is run by Mario Schubert, who started collecting GDR objects in his home region of Erzgebirge. The shop obviously displays the kind of ideal that Gregson and Crewe have recognized for retro shops, by being "part gallery, part personalized collection [...] construed as an artistic endeavour, and as materialization of retailer's own tastes and knowledges as well as their skills in restoration and repair" (Gregson and Crewe 2003, 67). The aesthetics are very different from the shops of the first-cycle consumption, and the shop seems to salvage its objects from commercial circulation, rather than letting them loose into it. Tellingly, the shop is presented as a "competitor to the DDR Museum" in a report by radio station RBB Berlin.<sup>99</sup> But it is rather the Wunderkammer-like display, which characterizes the many small GDR museums, than it is the slick displays and the interactive experiences of the DDR Museum that VEB Orange mimes. Like these museums, it is exclusively thing-based, and it presents an abundance of GDR products. Ironically, this stands in contrast to the didactic display of scarcity found in official exhibitions such as *Alltag in der DDR*.

A similar aesthetic of abundance is found in the shop *Stiefelkombinat*, located in the same trendy part of Prenzlauer Berg. This retro shop focuses mainly on clothing, with a large

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<sup>98</sup> Interview during research, February 2014.

<sup>99</sup> [http://www.rbb-online.de/doku/die\\_rbb\\_reporter/beitraege/reporter-jagd-auf-plaste.html](http://www.rbb-online.de/doku/die_rbb_reporter/beitraege/reporter-jagd-auf-plaste.html) (accessed February 2014).

collection of boots inspiring the shop's name. "Kombinat" is a GDR-connoting term, being an organizational title of the industry similar to "VEB." For example, the state's electronics manufacturer was called "VEB Kombinat Robotron." Stiefelkombinat does not feature GDR objects exclusively, but it has a typical focus on vintage clothing from the 1940s to the 1990s. The clothing pieces are closely hung, and the shop is decorated with period pieces such as posters and lamps. Again, the 1970s are the most present decade in decoration and clothing. Taking a closer look, many of the shop's clothing pieces are "Made in the GDR" in the typical "*Plaste und Elaste*" of man-made fabrics: a men's polo shirt in beige polyester, for instance. Furthermore, some sets of bed-linen are sold at a high price in their original GDR packing from the "VEB Planet" manufacturer. A sample object carrying the GDR materiality in a special context is a scarf from the GDR cruise ship "M/S Völkerfreundschaft." Such a ship offered cruises for the elite, for example to communist Cuba. The scarf is a significant object, symbolizing the elite culture (maybe of Stasi officers or party leaders) and the kitschy luxury of cruise travel, materialized in the printed polyester. As the name of the shop indicates, the GDR provenance resonates with the shop's desired retro image of, mainly, *Seventiesness*. The shop opened in 2007 and is a private enterprise like the VEB Orange.



**III. 47: Interior of Stiefelkombinat and linen in original GDR packing. Photo: Kristian Handberg 2014.**

Located in this area, which also hosts some of the most popular flea markets in Berlin, these shops express carefully chosen locations. Like the Montreal St. Laurent shops, they are able to attract casual visitors as well as knowing insiders, and to keep their status alternative as well as visible. It is of course located in the former East Berlin, close to the official memory site of the Berlin Wall at Bernauer Strasse. With the Ostalgie retro shops and the *Alltag in der DDR* exhibition, this part of Prenzlauer Berg has the character of an alternative memory district. Ironically, this area was a bohemian quarter seen as deviant by the GDR authorities, since it housed many oppositional groups and protest actions. From being a run-down and cheap area in the GDR era, it is recognized to have become “gentrified” and dominated by many newcomers. The orange kitchenware and the conforme homeliness it represents is obviously not typical of local memory. It would be better fitted with Eisenhüttenstadt, or the newly-built GDR suburbs of Marzahn and Hellersdorf in East Berlin. Instead, it seems to be Prenzlauer Berg’s role to carry on the counter-memory, albeit in a fashionable and sellable way.

#### **Intershop 2000: a material access to the past**

While these shops are commercial enterprises in a popular, if alternative, shopping area, Intershop 2000 has a different character. The shop is located in a retracted part of Friedrichshain, tucked away from any usual shopping and tourist routes. Intershop 2000 offers “Verkauf, Tausch und Verleih originaler Ostprodukte 1949-1989” (Sale, exchange and rental of original East-products 1949-1989), as it not only sells, but also exhibits documents and collects everyday GDR culture. Allegedly, it is frequently used as a resource for GDR props for film productions and museum exhibits. Intershop 2000 is run by the non-profit organization Vereins zur Dokumentation der DDR Alltagskultur and features designer Elke Matz’ personal collection of GDR specialties such as Mitropa and Interflug objects. The name “Intershop” refers to a chain of special shops in the GDR, where the privileged could buy high-quality goods, usually from the West for hard currency. Intershop 2000 reproduces the logo of the Intershops with the “2000” added as an ironic retro-futurism: in the present, after year 2000, it is the old-fashioned GDR goods that must be obtained through special shops such as the Intershop 2000 at, sometimes, considerably high prices.

Previously, Intershop 2000 was located in the special setting of a portable exhibition hall (Ill. 50, p. 216) from the GDR, but is now set in a more traditional shop. Like VEB Orange, the shop presents a wide assortment of GDR material culture (Ill. 49, p. 216), including ideological objects from public spaces as well as commodities from the home sphere. The shop’s flyer presents

catchwords such as “Mitropa – Spielzeug – Club Cola – Pfeffis – Ata – Plaste-Hühneierbecher – Design – Plakate – Mini-Bucher – Alltagsprodukte – Das Magazin – Agitation – Gebrauchsdesign – Form Rationel stapelbar” (“Mitropa – toys – Club Cola – Pfeffis (a liquor) – Ata (cleaning detergent) – Plastic Hen eggcups – design – posters – mini-books – everyday accessories – Das Magazin (a magazine) – agitation – industrial design – “Form Rationel stapelbar” (a functional design)”), giving coordinates of the depicted GDR universe. The displays are simpler and more matter of fact- like than the abundant shelves of VEB Orange. But it offers many of the same objects such as plastic kitchenware (again, with the Sonja eggcups as an icon), propaganda posters, and toys as popular sellers. There is also a big selection of tableware from Mitropa, the catering service of the GDR railways. Beside the more usual retro objects, Intershop 2000 has a huge selection of GDR labels for beers, lemonade and tin food, wrapping paper, shopping bags and other such unconventional, but authentic, collector’s items. This gives the shop a dedicated and specialized character: here it is not just stylish retro objects that are dealt with, but a more uncompromising presentation of GDR materials. Only half of Intershop 2000 contains goods for sale. The rest consists of small exhibitions from the organization’s collection and interior decoration “not for sale.” One such exhibition, “Vom VEB zum GmbH,” (Ill. 49, p. 216) compares the original editions to a number of Eastern German products from the GDR era, when they were produced by the state-owned VEBs, against their appearance today, when they are produced by privatized companies. Sometimes, such products are reintroduced in their original design for the Ostalgie market, and products are increasingly marketed with an “Eastern” identity such as Vita Cola and lemonade, currently marketed all over Berlin with the campaign “Limo made im Wilden Osten” (Lemonade made in the wild East) (Ill. 50, p. 216). The shop Ostpaket near Alexanderplatz in central Berlin has specialized in selling such East-associated products, from soap to “Rotkäppchen” sparkling wine, and “Tempo Erbsen” pea soup. The name Ostpaket (East-package) refers to “Westpaket”: the ever-popular packages of Western goods occasionally received in the GDR from relatives in the West. Here, it is of course reversed so that products from the East become much-coveted status symbols.<sup>100</sup>

Returning to Intershop 2000, the shop reveals an intricate combination of functions, showing the different interests that meet in thing-based Ostalgie. It is not just a retro shop miming

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<sup>100</sup> This will strike many as reminiscent of quest to reconstruct the GDR thing-world in the popular Ostalgie movie *Good Bye Lenin* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) where the protagonist has to create the illusion of the GDR still existing for his ill mother through the collection of old GDR goods.



III. 48: Intershop 2000. Photos: Kristian Handberg 2013.



III. 50: Flyer for Intershop 2000. Required in 2010 and Vita Cola ad 2014. From: [www.vita-cola.de](http://www.vita-cola.de)

the private collection, but *is* also a private collection and a non-profit organization with the aim of collecting, preserving and communicating its findings like a museum. It is driven by a large group of volunteers (nearly a 100 people) with a special interest in GDR heritage through design connoisseurship (like founder Elke Matz) or through ties of identity to the vanished country. As such, the interests in Intershop 2000 span from a local, community-based interest in the GDR as an honest memory practice of former GDR citizens (what Berdahl calls the “socially sanctioned commemorative practices” (Berdahl 1999)), to the more distanced interest of aestheticians and retro connoisseurs. It is obviously covered by interests other than retro, and would possibly dissociate its practice from retro. But the integrated character of the shop compared to the fashionable retro shops more centrally located arguably makes buying Ostalgie retro here more authentic, creating a desired feeling of distinction and knowingness (Elsie Baker, 2013).

To an even greater extent than a shop like VEB Orange, Intershop 2000 expresses the musealizing movement concerned with GDR everyday culture. As such, Intershop 2000 is closely tied to issues of cultural memory of the GDR. This memory is based on material objects and the daily thing-world of the GDR. Including objects such as wrapping paper and labels, its representation appears profound and serious, beyond a focus on the easily sellable or precious rarities. Being locally based, it represents a local configuration of objects: this collection of objects is only possible in this exact geography, and would be different even in Rostock or Dresden. It implies a local circulation of objects achieving an unexpected status as “durable” in the aforementioned reversed Intershop. Being more than a shop, Intershop 2000 should also be considered as having an important scene-character. It is a renowned resource for GDR materials and knowledge, and is itself a community. In this way it forms a scene in itself and is a hotspot on Berlin’s Ostalgie “scene.”

### **Ostalgie as a site-specific exploration of the recent past**

As a further illustration of the demand for GDR retro, the German Ebay auction site, in a recent search, featured over 100 000 items in the category “DDR und Ostalgie,” including vintage toy cars, an orange hand-mixer, and a retrospective quiz game (“Ferner Osten Würfelrally”).<sup>101</sup> Like retro in general, Ostalgie gets distributed at many levels, while only a few of those are analyzed here. The previous examples, focusing on the collections and musealizations of Ostalgie objects, show a field

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<sup>101</sup> <http://www.ebay.de/sch/DDR-Ostalgie-/8754/i.html> (accessed March 2014).

of tension between recognition of an overlooked cultural identity and an experience of “otherness” in these objects, and, accordingly, experiences that vary from the nostalgia of remembrance to ironic distance. And obviously, the categories of the historic, the aesthetic and the entertaining are entangled in various ways.

There is an obviously controversial element in the retrofication of a totalitarian state that was on the threshold of world-war confrontation with the West for 40 years. Hereby the Ostalgie retro is reminiscent of the *mode rétro* of the early 1970s, with its aestheticizing of the Nazi occupation in France. As the protests against Ostel’s Stasi suite shows, limits can easily be overstepped, and Ostalgie in general is often perceived with mistrust and attacked for expressing a lack of historical depth. However, my analysis suggests that retro practices actually offer historical perspective and discuss the memory of life and culture in the GDR. While not analyzing Ostalgie as such, but only the aspects related to retro culture, it is only in that context that I can discuss Ostalgie and the representation of the GDR in this project. But, as observers of Ostalgie have stated, there are rarely actual desires to “go back to the GDR” in any of the Ostalgie practices (Berdahl 1999, Boyer 2006). The analyzed examples mostly downplay any politicized representation of the GDR: no sympathies are declared and contemporary political merchandise is not present. From the serious study of the DOK to the “fun” Ostel, the aim is to present the material and let the recipient judge. This does not mean that Ostalgie retro is uncritical or depthless, as with Jameson or Baudrillard. As Berdahl concludes, “practices and products of Ostalgie both contest and affirm the new order” (Berdahl 1999, 192), being a counter memory in the asymmetrical context of the memory gap in the new Germany described by Ludwig. The thing-world is invested with aesthetic and historical recognition, providing an overview as well as specificity. There is a growing field of these recognized accounts, for instance in books on GDR design history and webpages dedicated to specific cases. An example of such a book is the anthology *Plattenbauten in Berlin* (ed. Enke and Giersch, 2013). This book presents a mapping guide to all the major living complexes in East Berlin, a detailed essay on the architectural history of the Plattenbau, and examples of artistic projects interpreting this type of building today. Through this elaborate and decorative non-academic book, the formerly despised, history- and beauty-less architecture is given aesthetic as well as historic attention. The same publisher, Edition Panorama, has also issued GDR retro-products, such as a reprint of the map “Berlin Hauptstadt der DDR 1968,”<sup>102</sup> originally issued by

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<sup>102</sup> [http://www.berlinplaene.de/shop/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=79](http://www.berlinplaene.de/shop/product_info.php?products_id=79) (accessed March 2014).

the VEB Landkarten Verlag in 1968, with West Berlin a white void, and a big map of the German-German border with memorials and museums plotted.

The recognition of GDR traces in the contemporary is the topic of several webpages and blogs. For example, *GDR Design: East German architectural bits and bobs* (<http://gdrdesign.wordpress.com/>) is a blog by a British art historian living in Berlin, documenting architectural detail and decoration from the GDR found in Berlin and its surroundings. As many of these elements are now being demolished, removed, or fallen into disrepair, the aim of the blog is to document them at their original locations. The blog reflects on the search for these traces and the sparse information available on them. Examples of blog posts include the exploration of a mural on a kindergarten wall in Berlin and a special feature on iron fences in Potsdam.

Another site, *Ostmodern* ([www.ostmodern.org](http://www.ostmodern.org)) presents “Dresdner Nachkriegsarchitektur” (Dresden post-war architecture) from 1945-1989 and guides the viewer through the individual buildings as well as the stylistic epochs. The incentive is the neglect of this architecture (“too young for being memorial, too old for being useful,” as the site states), and the special state of modern architecture in the former GDR, given that the original context has passed. Like the “web-museums” presented in Chapter 4, these sites are independent initiatives, presenting the recent past with the incentive of personal interest. In this way, they can be seen as musealizations, using the museum’s practice as a personal pursuit. To a remarkable degree, they are also based on an experience of materiality of the past, and its presence in the contemporary world. They point towards the local appearances, and recognize the neglected and half-forgotten objects in the actual geography.

In the aesthetic consensus of a reunited Germany, the *Plattenbau* buildings and other GDR traces have been an unwanted presence, bringing with them *involuntary memories* of the past. As Olsen says of the material remnants of power: “The stones, iron and concrete used in some past and present empires are not only burdening the brains of their inhabitants; they left a thick and sticky heritage of materials that to some extent, at least, explains their continuous, effective history” (Olsen 2010, 162). These materials are an actual presence today, where they still produce meaning: both as involuntary memories, but also of aesthetic fascination. This fascination, expressed in *Ostalgie retro*, represents a counter memory, giving attention to aspects of the GDR other than the officially promoted memory. It has different incentives from documentary historiography, political interests, and the more traditional tourist industry and local branding.



## Ostalgie between things and mythology

Ostalgie should be understood as created by these material presences (from whole cities of Plattenbau to a small “*Plaste und Elaste*” sticker) *and* by the imagined ideas of the GDR and *GDRness*. As such, it is formed through the things – and somewhat against them, as they are attributed with a desired and presupposed meaning. As Berdahl sums up:

In this business of Ostalgie, East German products have taken on new meanings when used for the second time around. Now stripped of their original context of an economy of scarcity or an oppressive regime, these products largely recall an East Germany that never existed. They thus illustrate not only the way in which memory is an interactive, malleable, and highly contested phenomenon, but also the processes through which things become informed with a remembering – and forgetting capacity.

(Berdahl 1999, p. 198)

This is of course reminiscent of the way that “Fiftiesness,” for instance, is constructed in retro culture and of different versions of the Fifties created in retro (see Chapter 4). Notably, the remembrance of the GDR collides with the Western post-war popular style history rooted in conceptions of the Fifties, the Sixties, the Seventies, and the Eighties. Apparently, these periods are not valid in the popular memory of the GDR. In the shops, and in many of the museums as well, the objects and the tableaux (of a grocer’s shop, for instance) are not given a dating but are only labelled as “from the GDR.” Where objects are often dated, even to specific years of the 1970s or 1980s, in “Western” retro shops (for example in Rokokonut described in the previous chapter), they are not given such a dating even in dedicated Ostalgie retro shops such as VEB Orange or museum exhibitions such as the DDR Museum.

Of course, the GDR and its design and popular culture were characterized by other conditions such as central planning, as opposed to the capitalist market’s constant introduction of new models. Still, there is a tendency to associate the GDR with a special temporality of backwards modernity. As previously described, this can be registered in the SED book and exhibition with its “Galapagos Islands of design” description. Anthropologist Dominic Boyer refers to the common notion of an *allochronism* between East and West Germans: “West Germans commonly narrate the

East through temporal displacement, as though entering an eastern space meant stepping backwards in time” (Boyer 2006, 373). To a certain degree, this is turned into a virtue in retro discourse. Specific places are visited for their authenticity, and remote corners of the country are trawled for retro objects.

As registered in the descriptions of the shops, there is a special presence of 1970s objects in the Ostalgie-oriented retro spaces, and the popular image of GDR-ness is arguably characterized by *Seventiesness* through a vision of bright orange and brown, man-made fabrics, and concrete blocks. This is partly motivated by a presence of GDR objects from this era in circulation. Because of the scarcity in the early years of the republic, there are relatively few characteristic 1950s-objects. But after the “small Wirtschaftswunder” of the 1960s, and the official promotion of a more modern design scheme in the 1970s, a larger amount of objects “made in the GDR” appeared. A lot of these were still in circulation in 1989, when the clock stopped on the East German production machine. Still, there seems to be an expression of active preference for Seventiesness. I will argue that this can be seen as related to the special meanings of Seventiesness in the Western context. This era is commonly perceived as “awful,” (Hine 2007, 10) “the decade that taste forgot” (as an article by Jon Savage notoriously dubbed the decade in *The Face* in 1988), or at least ambiguously remembered, as in Thomas Hine’s description of a signature event of the era – the Ant Farm’s Media Burn happening, which appeared as “bleak, funny, transgressive, and intensely satisfying in a way that was either juvenile or profound” (Hine 2007, 5). The Seventies are seen as excessive, yet poor and artificial, and without traditions and values, and thus despised by conservatives. Furthermore, the decade is often associated with collectivity, left-wing kitsch, and even the terrorism of organizations like the RAF. It was the diluted echo of the revolutionary “1968,” where new ideas “went wrong,” or at least were accommodated to harsh realities. As such, the 1970s have been commonly despised by the Left as well. A lot of these features of the “Seventiesness” can be associated with the GDR, of course mainly in its dubious aesthetics. Seventies retro is generally characterized by an ironic connoisseurship and an anti-fashion stance, rather than the admiring and thorough adaption of the Fifties seen among the rockabillies, for instance. Ostalgie retro is suitable for this ironic stance, giving it an extra degree of anti-aesthetic transgression. The current popularity of Seventies-tinged Ostalgie retro could be seen as a further developed form of the demand for 1970s retro, which characterized the 1990s (as it is seen in Gregson, Brooks and Crewe 2001). After the “Western” 1970s had been explored and somewhat

exhausted, the “Eastern” 1970s (and retro as such) has become ripe for harvest, with a new supply of available objects.

Referencing a less known context, Ostalgie retro demands a higher degree of knowledge and alternative dispositions (i.e. Elsie Baker 2013). It is thus readable as an advanced form of retro culture, not just directed towards the Fifties or the Seventies, but towards an entirely different form of modern culture.

### **Ostalgie in memory culture**

Again, it is important to underscore that Ostalgie in its various forms and meanings carries different roles in a cultural memory perspective. Many of these roles have been discussed in the academic literature in a wave of recent publications on post-communist cultural studies,<sup>103</sup> and not least, in the German public culture, with the aforementioned musealizations and government initiatives such as the heavily discussed Gedächtnisstättenkonzeption. Inspired by this commission, an anthology defining “Erinnerungsorte der DDR” was issued in 2009, edited by Martin Sabrow, the leader of the commission (Sabrow, et. all, 2009). This anthology follows Nora’s definition of the *lieu de mémoire*, including chapters on immaterial concepts (such as “Antifascismus” and “Zensur”), symbolic institutions in the GDR society (such as “Die Kinderkrippe” and “Die Erster Mai und Fünfzehnter Januar”), physical places (such as Eisenhüttenstadt and Der Palast der Republik), and things and cultural phenomena (such as the Trabi and Die Puhdys). In this manner, it obviously aims at including the State and the *Herrschaftskultur* as well as everyday culture and the experience of everyday life. The introductory chapter by Sabrow discusses the memory culture of the GDR in the wake of the debate of the commission’s recommendations. Sabrow suggests that different kinds of memory have been active, such as the everyday communicative memory in families and other communities, and the more formalized versions in the educational system and the official memory culture. In the years immediately after 1989 three perspectives dominated: *das Diktaturgedächtniss* (the memory of dictatorship) centered on the denouncement of the SED-regime, which dominated politicians from West Germany and dissidents from the GDR, *das Arrangementsgedächtniss* (the

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<sup>103</sup> For example, Todorova and Gille (editors): *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, Berghahn Books 2012, and Clarke and Wölfel (editors): *Remembering the German Democratic Republic: divided memory in a united Germany*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

memory of adjustment) centered on the average citizen's way of dealing with the conditions of the GDR, and *das Fortschrittsgedächtnis* (the memory of progress) promoted by some former leading GDR figures and regime supporters defending parts of the system and stating its progressive development (Sabrow, et al. 2009, 18-19). Following these more immediate perspectives based on actual roles in the GDR, another memory perspective has begun to settle. This phase is not so much based on immediate recognition or personal memory, but rather on the interest in the GDR as different, to which the many museums testify. The present age is dominated by a general "history boom" not aimed at identification with the past, but rather with a "characteristic double movement of approximation and distancing" ("einer charakteristischen Doppelbewegung von Annäherung und Distanzierung," Sabrow, et al. 2009, 23). This double character is materialized in the site of memory (*der Erinnerungsort*): "It gives us the opportunity to enter a dialogue with a past that we would neither like to repeat nor do without, and it maintains its aura from its ostensible or actual authenticity; at the memory site we sense the past speaking directly to us, while being aware of its irreproducibility."<sup>104</sup> The memory site is "Geschichte zum anfassen," to repeat the slogan of the DDR Museum.

The interest in the materiality and the effort put into collecting and aestheticizing the GDR past could also be seen in the perspective of the shift from the level of communicative memory to the forms of cultural memory. Musealization (happening in actual museums as well in museum-like shops and other retro-cultural practices) is one of the most important processes in a post-traditional and secular modern society of ordering the past and making a common version of society out of it. The wave of museum exhibitions of GDR every-day culture, books on GDR ruins in the suburbs, and the demand for *GDR rare grooves* among DJ's<sup>105</sup> are all formalized practices coming from the communicative everyday sphere, not based on the transmission of personal experiences, but rather representations of a past experienced as distant and close, as Sabrow suggests.

The focus on a non-Western version of modern culture (even if geographically from the middle of Europe and with a historical background in European culture) suggests an awareness of an *other* modernity, in this case the communism of the GDR. The atrocities of the SED-regime

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<sup>104</sup> "Er bietet uns die Gelegenheit zum Dialog mit einer Vergangenheit, die wir weder wiederholen noch missen möchten, und er bezieht seine Ausstrahlung aus der Aura seiner vorgeblichen oder tatsächlichen Authentizität; Im Erinnerungsort spüren wir die Vergangenheit unmittelbar zu uns reden und sind uns doch ihrer Unwiederholbarkeit gewiss" (Sabrow et. all. 2009, 25).

<sup>105</sup> For example, a series of compilations of jazzfunk from the vaults of the GDR Amiga label has been issued under the title "Amiga a Go-Go (Deutsch-Demokratisch Rare Grooves)."

and the Soviet empire aside, this implied dealing with the conditions and challenges of post-war modernity – which the societies west of the Iron Curtain also had to do through their more well-known history. New levels of industrialism, private cars, TV, computers, and new global encounters also happened in the GDR, and Ostalgie retro reflects this. Arguably, there is a tendency to associate the negative sides of modernity with the GDR: the joyless concrete of the Plattenbau, the pollution, and the horrid aesthetics of the man-made fabrics. While there was indeed a lot of this in the GDR, Western post-war modernity also produced these things. In this way, the GDR functions as an Other modernity in the form of a negative counter image, into which all bad things may be projected. The GDR retro challenges this tendency, not by defending the political system, but by making other things present. Ostalgie portrays retro as a subversive counter memory, not characterized by a lack of rootedness in the past and a lack of historical meaning, but by a presence of the past and an investigation of the overlooked or even repressed sides of the past. Ostalgie retro makes a vanished way of life visible: it is parallel to, and reminiscent of, our world and its modern history, and is a concrete memory for millions of people, but it also appears different and *incredibly strange*. This encounter is not usually included in the grand narratives of history, where the GDR is identified with spectacular phenomena like the Stasi and the Berlin Wall, and it is able to develop our understanding of the GDR as well as our own modern past.

### **Conclusion: Ostalgie retro as alternative musealization**

The retrofication of the GDR in Berlin and East Germany is a remarkable example of retro culture making the issues of cultural memory present, but it also raises questions of retro's legitimacy in these discourses. It challenges the usual civil status of retro culture by being dedicated to material related to the "communist dictatorship on German soil," and it offers "Nights in GDR horror for just 9 Euro," with days in Plaste und Elaste. Ostalgie, however, is more than a sensational cabinet of horrors: it pays attention to a repressed memory of the thing-world of the GDR everyday, providing a qualified mapping thereof and an appeal to reflect and reconsider its legacy.

It is directed towards a specific version of modern culture from behind the Iron Curtain, implying an awareness of *multiple modernities* – Shmuel Eisenstadt's concept for indicating that modern culture does not solely belong to a "homogenizing and hegemonic Western program of modernity," but is rather formed through "a multiplicity of cultural programs," (Eisenstadt 2000, 1-2), which could obviously include the GDR version of post-war modernity.

This multiplicity resonates with Löfgren's sense of belonging, created through the local specificities of modern culture previously described.

In the debate on German memory, the notion of Ostalgie has implied embarrassment and accusations of a depthless use of the past. This is reminiscent of the reactions that retro provoked in the 1980s by critics such as Fredric Jameson and Lucie Lippard (see chapter 4). While not including all the meanings of Ostalgie in this study, I have shown that Ostalgie retro implies a specialized knowledge, and gives aesthetic and historic attention to previously unrecognized and disregarded materials.

This implies a high degree of musealization in the collection and exhibition of the past. I have suggested that retro cultural Ostalgie overlaps with a remarkable wave of museums dedicated to the same matter in a thing-based depiction of GDR everyday culture. The image of GDRness as a distinctly *other* modernity is created through the presence of things as well as of a mythology and collective memory. Both are circulated and gathered at distinct scenes, such as retro shops, or in the other musealizing practices described throughout this thesis. These places materialize an image of the GDR thing world, which is remarkably dominated by a *Seventiesness* in a selected configuration of objects associated with this era. It is suggested that the anti-aesthetics commonly associated with the decade fits with the perception of the GDR.

The Ostalgie retro is aesthetically transgressive, dealing with a *troubled heritage*, which questions the limits of retrofication. As Andreas Ludwig recognizes, "there is a clear gap between a somewhat official interpretation of the GDR within German history and the communicative memory of individual lives" (Ludwig 2011, 53). Ostalgie retro could obviously be seen as a response to this gap, operating as an experimental practice of history and cultural memory.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### Summary of the project's objects and results

This dissertation started with the recognition of the new popularity of retro, and of the need to understand this important contemporary phenomenon better, in more qualified and less biased ways, to complement the discourses formed by postmodernism and its critique, which have dominated the reception of retro. I have suggested an understanding of retro as cultural memory based in materiality, and I have declared the need to see retro as based on *specific pasts*, *specific places*, and *specific things*. As a starting point, definitions of retro from theory and practice were summarized and a focus on the period from 1950 to 1980 was noticed. To clarify the specificity of the term retro, the related concepts of kitsch, camp, and cult were briefly introduced. This illustrated the importance of such fields in modern culture as well as their complex character and undescribed status. I also presented the more overall concepts of authenticity, irony, and nostalgia, describing the subtle sensibility of retro and its aesthetic effects.

The following chapter established a framework for the analysis of retro through a number of sources from different disciplines and traditions, centered on an *object perspective* and a *culture perspective*. The first emphasized the overlooked presence of *things* in the modern world but also the need to understand materiality in a processual, relational, and performative way, as incorporated in the term *materializations* by Damsholt, Simonsen, and Mordhorst (2009).

According to this, retro should be seen as something happening to, through, and with things. The culture perspective examined subculture and popular culture as the *fields* that retro had been especially associated with. Using the theory of Bourdieu, it was recognized that special logics have been associated with these fields and a struggle to define retro as either part of the resistance of subculture or of the passive popular culture was observed. The currency of such delimited fields are questioned in contemporary culture by notions such as post-subculture and the omnipresence of popular culture – a condition well illustrated by retro's remix of past subcultural stances and connoisseurship of pop-cultural references. On the basis of this recognition I outlined some of the overall discussions of cultural identity through the aestheticization of everyday life, individuality versus collectivity, and the new status of objects and aesthetics in the “global culture industry.”

From setting up this overall perspective as a background for the discussion of retro, I narrowed the focus to some especially adequate ideas for understanding retro. These include the concept of “scenes,” as described by Will Straw, and the recognition of belonging and cultural identity, created through modern material culture by Orvar Löfgren. These insights made the material and cultural basis for retro clearer and contributed to an understanding of its circulation and identity-forming character.

The chapter on cultural memory emphasized the importance of the academic Cultural Memory Studies as well as the “memory boom” in contemporary culture. Through Halbwachs’ pioneering theory of collective memory, which forms the individual as well as social group’s identity, Jan Assmann’s distinction between formalized cultural memory and everyday communicative memory, Aleida Assmann’s description of the canon and the archive, and Pierre Nora’s actual mapping of the cultural memory through sites, things, symbols and practices, a rich material for understanding retro was gathered.

The new prominence of memory and history, spanning from world politics and prestigious official institutions to popular culture and local initiatives, and the underlying simultaneity of *hypermnnesia* and *amnesia* suggested by Huyssen, are all obvious contexts for retro, which perfectly embodied the shift from “present futures” to “present pasts” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it should be recognized that retro sometimes forms an alternative to the mainstreams of the memory boom and its focus on dramatic events such as wars and atrocities, and the well-promoted event-making of established institutions. Here, the concept of *musealization* and the presence theory was introduced as central to understanding contemporary memory culture.

The case study of the 1950s explained this era as the preferred past through the development of retro since the early 1970s, leading up to the current intense materialization of the Fifties, characterized by an accessible popularity as well as a knowing specialization. The chapter’s historical perspective illustrates the span of retro, and how it created various essences of the historical 1950s as a distinct *Fiftiesnesses*. It should also be underlined that the project has given focus to this case, and other eras such as the 1960s or the 1970s, which could have been analyzed in a similar way. The Fifties are seen as especially central to retro – through its history as well as its current popularity – as a specific past, embodying an experience of familiar modernity and exotic otherness, as well as being a contested past, disregarded by progressives and conservatives alike, which retro has been actively reinterpreting.



In the case study of Montreal, I outlined the context of the complex modern history of Montreal and Quebec, and how the cultural memory of the 1950s and 1960s is important for its cultural identity today, expressed in the colorful “Red Light 1950s,” and the ultramodern “Expo 1960s.” The examination of the city’s retro scenes of shops and practices showed a remarkable presence of these local versions of modern culture. Thus, it was stated that retro culture has been important in the recognition of Montreal’s becoming modern, with a focus on the locally specific modern culture.

The case of Berlin and the formerly divided city’s even more dramatic modern history set the stage for a discussion of the limits of retro. Can the everyday culture of an alleged totalitarian state be made into fashionable retro? The examples of Ostalgie retro often caused controversy and heated debate, relating to the complex memory of the GDR in the united Germany. Concentrating on the retro role of Ostalgie, I noticed a remarkable similarity between the wave of museums, exhibiting the GDR’s everyday materiality and the aesthetic and historical recognition of the same material in retro practices such as shops and private blogs. Ostalgie retro obviously fills a gap between the official memory culture’s focus on large structures and communicative memory based on everyday remembering and personal experience. Furthermore, Ostalgie retro recognizes a different modernity from the well-known Western version, exploring new aspects of our recent past. Here, there is potential for further work on cases of retro culture beyond the Western context, and on these other modernities in general.

Through these specific cases, my study has brought new material into the field of retro studies, and set up new perspectives for an understanding of retro. It has also been my aim to contribute to the development of cultural memory studies, and to see a new relevance in materiality in arts and cultural studies. First and foremost, I have wanted to present retro in a way that reflects the distinct, yet varied, character of the phenomenon.

### **Retro as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of the forgotten 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

My project has built a cultural historical frame for the catchy but unstudied concept of *retro*, in order to qualify the notion of this central feature of contemporary culture. I have analyzed retro practices aimed at a specific past (the Fifties), and as based on specific contexts (Montreal and Berlin). Through this, I have wanted to modify the perception of retro as a depthless and inferior

practice fundamentally lacking what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – the mastering of the past through knowledge as well as critical reflection – and instead see retro as a central part of our mastering of the past.

Through its many forms retro is concerned with a specific era – the post-WW2 modernity – rather than a random cannibalization of just any past. Retro is not a made-up fiction, but is always based on actual *things* and practiced in specific contexts, as illustrated through my case studies. Retro is not just to be studied as design and fashion, as the sparse previous reception has focused on, or as being only a marketing ploy. It is important to state that retro is not a centrally owned brand or marketed commodity in the global culture industry: retro is a multiplicity of practices spanning from what is usually associated with subculture and specialized connoisseur niches to a more widely accessible mainstream of contemporary culture, displaying developments in and between these fields and their complex configurations. Retro covers H&M's campaign with Lana del Rey singing "Blue Velvet" in a vintage microphone, promoting the chain's 1950s-inspired collection using retro for mass-market appeal, as well as rockabilly cult artist Bloodshot Bill materializing Fiftiesness as a sign of underground culture and subcultural belonging.

I have shown the remarkable convergence between retro and the interest displayed by the more established institutions in the material culture of the recent past, for example by the many new GDR museums and the popular 1950s edition of the Golden Days festival in Copenhagen. Obviously, retro has been an inspiration for exhibitions of the modern past, and it has unofficially curated the collection of objects as well as perceptions of the period. Retro is centrally engaged in our formation of a common past. For example, retro can be located in the transition between the informal and everyday *communicative memory* and a formalized *cultural memory*, to use the terms of Jan Assmann.

My analysis has also emphasized the important element of *musealization* displayed by retro. As understood by Lübke and Huyssen, this concept describes how the museum's collection and display of the past has become a widespread feature of contemporary culture, far beyond its traditional institutions. Indeed, retro does this through an inwards turned collection and an outwards turned styling, and the pioneering recognition of such neglected cultural forms as Quebecois disco records, GDR *Plaste und Elaste*, and the currently popular Scandinavian Modern furniture. The musealization of retro implies a considerable amount of historical recognition as well as the attribution of aesthetic value and its use as leisure entertainment. This merger of the domains of the historical, the aesthetic, and entertainment breaks with previous distinctions (such as museums

dedicated to the “past as past,” and fashion and pop culture focused on the new), but is emblematic of contemporary culture’s popular experience-making of the past, known as the “history boom.”

Often, however, retro is in a counter-position to the popular history boom, since it is concerned with the overlooked and sometimes even unwanted aspects of the past. Through its different forms, retro is a self-conscious effort aimed at creating a contrasted interplay of past and present, rather than a complete recreation of an ideal moment of the past. To use Svetlana Boym’s distinction, its nostalgia is of the reflexive kind, being ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary, and it prefers authentic ruins to perfect reconstructions, in a focus on the longing and the passage of time itself rather than on the “truth” of the historical home. This is reminiscent of Sabrow’s characteristic of the contemporary stage of the GDR memory: the memory is no longer based on the actual roles and identification with the past, but rather on remembrance as such, and the pastness of even the recent past. In a characteristic double movement of intimacy and distance, the things and places of the past work as *lieux de mémoire*: where memory is able to materialize itself, or, where the material generates memory (Nora 1989). Here the material and memory meet, and the past is made present beyond its exclusively intellectual study. The project sees these dimensions as central and overlooked incentives for retro, and material culture and cultural memory studies have thus been used as theoretical and methodological backgrounds for the reading of retro.

In this concluding chapter attention is paid to some of the questions that the preceding chapters’ analyses of retro have raised. I will start with the question of the current state of retro, and how its new popularity should be seen. Then, the question of who retro culture concerns is discussed: whose past is it, and how should it be viewed? This leads to the central question of the past that retro is focused on. Why this specific past, and how is *the modern* remembered? Finally, I will look at roads ahead: where is retro heading, and why is retro still important? By doing this, a more traditional conclusion, summarizing the project’s results, is combined with some of the reflections that retro provoke, and which have also been my own incentives for the project.

## **Contemporary retro: Retromania or bottomless treasure chest?**

The introductory first chapter and the historical rendition in Chapter 4 map the historical development of retro, and suggest that retro has reached a current popularity differing from the more limited underground status it was previously associated with. I have stated that this new status

is characterized by *accessibility* (retro is readily available and made visible beyond insider-scenes) as well as dedicated *thoroughness* (retro is perfected and specialized, more resources are invested in retro practices, including new categories). To a certain degree, retro has changed its status from an *anti-aesthetics*, using outmoded kitsch-objects as eye-catching props (for example, the image and sound of new-wave group The B-52's), to an aesthetic recognition of its objects (as in Bloodshot Bill's dedicated Fifties aesthetics). The status of retro objects has followed a wave from *obscure curiosity* to *aesthetic object*: the orange plastics kitchenware are displayed along with signs giving designer names and dating in the retro shop, and the story of the forgotten exotica composer or German disco scene are told in blogs and magazines. Retro objects are not cheaply scavenged at the limits of the market just before being destructed, but are acquired and used in a circulation of knowledge and value in aestheticized gallery-like spaces and dedicated collector fora. Retro objects are even given a status of good taste in a more traditional sense, being sold at high prices to an affluent audience, for instance in the Mid-century modern shops of Montreal's Rue Amherst. As popular objects, retro objects seemingly affirm their placement in the "durables" category in Thompson's scheme, rather than the oblivion of the garbage phase.

But the popular demand for retro objects also brings them into fast-paced commercial circulation, not so different from first-cycle consumption of accessible distribution for a mass-audience. Thus, the distance to the usual commodity culture is seemingly blotted out. A marking out as alternative has hitherto been central to the self-understanding of retro practices. According to Christian Thorne in his essay *The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded* (2013), in acquiring an object as retro, "[...] you are salvaging it from the sphere of circulation, and perhaps even from the tawdriness of use," (Thorne 2003, 113) and "[u]nderlying retro culture is a vision of a world in which commodity production has come to a halt, in which objects have been handed down, not for our consumption, but for our care" (Thorne 2003, 114). The new status also differs from the alternative self-understanding of the practitioners of retro culture, and the knowledge and (subcultural) capital associated with it. Despite this, my study indicates that different forms of retro coexist, and that a knowing and challenging practice of retro is more present than ever. As a response to the popularization of some retro characteristics and the history boom as such, retro gets more specialized, and the scenes invest more work, study, and money in their cultivation of the recent past.

Retro's new visible presence in the cultural landscape calls for different reactions. Some write off retro as an "addiction to the past" and are weary of the culture's vitality as such,

whereas others are more confident in the critical and aesthetical potential of retro. Simon Reynolds' polemical account of contemporary culture's "retromania" (Reynolds 2011) is a call to arms against the "re"-sentiment taking over from pop culture's previous "future rushes" and "nows." According to Reynolds, culture seems to be "[...] a hipster stock market based around trading in pasts rather than futures," (Reynolds 2011, 419) with "record-collector rock" of citations and samples, and even "crossfires of revival simultaneity" as different retro trends compete in the "'Re'-decade" after 2000, dominated by "revivals, reissues, remakes, reenactments. Endless retrospection [...]" (Reynolds 2011, xi). *Retromania* is supported by new technology which promotes a condition of "hyper-stasis": "In the digital present, everyday life consists of hyper-acceleration and near-instantaneity (downloading, web pages constantly being refreshed, the impatient skimming of texts on screens), but on the macro-cultural level things feel static and stalled. We have this paradoxical combination of speed and standstill." (Reynolds 2011, 427). As noted in the introduction, Reynolds expresses a modernist position of belief in the "new" and a progress-based history. This is not an unproblematic way of viewing pop culture, which has been much more multidirectional (as the examples in Chapter 4 illustrate), as the alleged "new" is a very selective category by Reynolds, even having the character of a generational canon of 1980s post-punk and early electronica (genres upon which Reynolds has written influential books).<sup>106</sup>

First and foremost, the revival of the past can be approached with less weariness, and as having a creative as well as critical potential. This is expressed by another British music writer and artist, Bob Stanley. The band Saint Etienne, which Stanley formed in 1988, has combined retro influences such as the 1960s girl group sound, library music, and even prog rock with contemporary electronic sounds. Concurrently, Stanley has been active in music writing and reissuing of special collections of music from the past, recently on his own label Croydon Municipal. The most recent release gathers the "Popcorn" sound: American soul and R&B records with a special sound which became popular as an underground club phenomenon in Belgium in the 1970s!<sup>107</sup> In the words of Stanley, this genre was built by "curation rather than creation" as these recordings (like the British Northern Soul of the 1970s) were not intended for the Belgian club scene, where they were recognized more than ten years later, forming a proto-retro culture. Stanley has written about the Belgian "Popcorn" scene as "the last underground music scene of Europe" in his music column in

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<sup>106</sup> For example, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (1998), and *Rip it Up and Start Again. Postpunk 1978-1984* (2005).

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.cherryred.co.uk/shopexd.asp?id=4477> (accessed March 2014).

The Guardian, (February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014<sup>108</sup>) in regards to its secrecy and rarity. Such a rediscovery as Stanley's compilation and article is an example of retro's current specificity, in-depth research, and awareness of the local variants of modern culture: not just where it is produced, but where it is practiced. Stanley himself formulates the incentive for the reissues as such: "There is a bottomless treasure chest to rifle through – plenty of shonky enterprises are doing it badly, not enough are doing it well (an honourable mention here for the Elvis specialists Memphis Recording Service), so I thought it was about time I started a re-issue label and had some fun of my own. My aim is for Croydon Municipal to put the past back together in unexpected and exciting ways [...] Its all waiting to be done."<sup>109</sup> To fulfill the potential of the past is an important task here. Too much past is not the problem, but rather the careless way in which it is treated by the established record industry.

To describe the different positions of Reynolds and Stanley, I will state that Reynolds expresses a *meaning-culture* position demanding *depth* and the specific qualities of new departure and articulations of *the modern*, even in the works of pop culture. Furthermore, his teleological view of history, where cultural forms consequently lead to more advanced forms, can be associated with Gumbrecht's description of the *meaning-culture* dominating in Western thinking. Stanley is more focused on *presence*. There are no overall meaning incentives formulated but instead a search for presence, wherever it is. In his new book *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! The Story of Modern Pop* (2013) Stanley gives a detailed account on the history of pop music from the first British hit list in 1952 to today. In Stanley's story of modern pop, it is not the progressive new that is the imperative, but rather the contradiction and interplay: "What creates great pop? Tension, opposition, progress and fear of progress. I love the tensions between the industry and underground, between artifice and authenticity, between the adventurers and the curators, between rock and pop, between dumb and clever, between boys and girls" (Stanley 2013, xiv). Stanley mentions punk and its doubled status of revolt into the new *or* into the old, as an example of this tension: "Some saw punk, for instance, as a way of rewriting the rules completely, as the Futurists had done in art, while others read 1977 a return to roots, the excitement of first-wave rock 'n' roll revisited" (Ibid.). And even though Stanley recognizes the "modern pop era" of the 1950s to the 1990s as a unique musical epoch tied to specific conditions and media such as radio, records, and the music press, he is assured that something new will come up, and that: "The modern pop era is all there to be enjoyed and pilfered,

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<sup>108</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2014/feb/05/belgium-popcorn-underground-music-scene-europe-northern-soul> (accessed March 2014).

<sup>109</sup> <http://croydonmunicipal.blogspot.dk/> (accessed March 2014).

curated, compiled and recompiled, an endless, interchangeable jigsaw puzzle for future generations” (Stanley 2013, 737). Retro is not a threat but a resource, it seems, in response to Reynolds.

## Whose retro?

Which takes us to the question concerning retro’s representation: by whom, and for who is retro? From the start of this study it was stated that retro is not tied to individual memory: it is not a personal revival of what was once important for oneself, then became *démodé*, and was finally revived as personal nostalgia or a commemorative anniversary (such as the concerts with GDR rock stars aimed at their original fans who grew up in the 1970s). Instead, retro is an *appropriated* past and a materialization of an imagined context.

Arguably, retro is characterized by a condition recognized by Slavoi Zizek’s writing in 1991 of the current interest in the American film noir<sup>110</sup> of the 1940s: Films we are fascinated by, but no longer can identify with or take seriously the way the original audience could:

What we really see, when we watch a film noir, is the gaze of the other: we are fascinated by the gaze of the mythic “naïve” spectator, the one who was “still able to take is seriously,” in other words, the one who “believes in it” for us, in place of us. For that reason, our relation to a film noir is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance: ironic distance toward its diegetic reality, fascination with the gaze.

(Zizek 1991, p. 112)

According to this, the contemporary retro cultist fantasizes the original consumer of, say, a Martin Denny exotica album or an orange hand mixer, and is simultaneously tied to this “retro avatar” (my term) and distanced from it. This resonates with the combined nostalgia and irony often recognized in retro, and its complex character of polemic cultural memory. There is an obvious ambivalence of admiringly longing for, and patronizingly distancing oneself from the original context of retro objects. The original purchasers of retro objects are seen as naïve and simple, one-dimensionally consuming the new and popular objects to “keep up with the Joneses,” and throwing them away, as

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<sup>110</sup> Even though it was allegedly coined by a French critic in the 1940s, *film noir* is a retrospective concept not used in the American film industry of the 1940s. The term itself thus reflects the posthumous interest and historicization.

opposed to the knowing retro cultist who not only consumes or gets seduced by the promise of the new. But simultaneously, there is an often declared an admiration for the quality of the original objects and the imagined life around them. The Fifties objects and the lives around them are seen as more real, producing another *presence* than the contemporary world is capable of (remember Lux Interior's admiration for the 1950s rockabillys for possessing an integrity and experience that we will never be able to get). Of course, this differs in the variants of retro culture. The admiring take on the Fifties of rockabilly subculture is different from the carnivalesque retro of costume parties and kitsch fashion. Both of these positions, the admiring allying and the distancing irony, are criticized: the alliance with the past is aesthetically regressive and even repeats discriminating views of the past, such as the gender roles and the racism of the 1950s (as Lippard, the first of many critics, suggested), while the irony demonstrates an exploitative disrespect for the past.

Here, I will state that retro should be perceived as an aesthetic form not defined by representational duties, political power, or social responsibility. The objects enter the retro category, not because of their utility, but because of their aesthetic disposition. Following the philosophical definition of the aesthetic, retro is primarily an interest-less disposition defining its own purpose. Like other aesthetic forms, retro can of course carry a critical message. The significance of the outmoded artefacts as a resource for critique is stated by Walter Benjamin in a little reminiscent, if not quite similar, contrasting of the past and present of modern culture. Commenting on the surrealists' use of outmoded everyday objects in their works as an avant-garde strategy, Benjamin described this as a "profane illumination" of the promises of earlier objects of capitalist modernity. These are replaced by new things which give the same promises. But here, the outmoded old object possesses a "revolutionary energy" by revealing the continuously broken promises of the capitalist society in a circle that can only be stopped by the revolution (Benjamin 1999, 210). Here Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit* is relevant. "*Jetztzeit*" describes specific moments which unite the past and the present in "the presence of the now" (Benjamin 1968, 261). *Jetztzeit* is a moment out of time, where the usual historical ordering (the "homogenous empty time" of the ruling class, history written from the perspective of victors)<sup>111</sup> can be overcome, and the past be accessed through what Benjamin calls a "tiger's leap into the past" (ibid.). The *Jetztzeit* occurs in special situations,

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<sup>111</sup> Oxford Online Reference: A Dictionary of Critical Theory (ed. Ian Buchanan), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-376> (accessed March 2014).



possibly in connection to objects and images from the past, such as the outmoded objects, photos, or personal memories described in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*.

In the Jetztzeit, the reference to the past is obviously a progressively enabling force against the consensus of the present. Even though it has a somewhat mysterious character, Benjamin's alternative presence of the past seems to be based upon a combination of the historical and the aesthetic. Furthermore, Benjamin includes material from everyday culture and the early popular culture of his age, which are seen as having enabling potential. Even though it is not generally defined by a revolutionary energy, retro could be seen as creating such moments out of the advancing time of modern society and its structuring of the past.

Yet Benjamin's thinking is political and functional in a way that cannot be applied to retro (it is also tied to the pre-World War II world, before the era to which retro specifically belongs). To characterize the incentive for retro, the perspective of presence thinking introduced in Chapter 3 is more open, and should be taken into account. Retro could be seen as defined by its ability to establish a presence. Objects and symbols are brought into the retro category in a voluntary and non-purposive action, motivated by what could be called the production of presence. Through the research for this project (as well as other examinations of retro cultural practices), the different groups of practitioners themselves concurrently mention *the presence* created through the retro objects and the sociality of the retro scenes. The past is made present through tangible objects and visible symbols and is, as such, *materialized* in the present. The frame of cultural memory also emphasizes the ability to make the past present, and specifically which past we make present, as central to culture's collective memory.

To this notion of presence, participation could be added. In all its forms, retro is an interactive and participatory culture, through its scenes and their sociability as well as the individually-based practices of collection and styling. It is based on individual involvement – from the subcultural investment of “work” described by Hebdige to the creation of a shared past through musealization and memory culture. Hereby it can be seen as contributing to a democratization of history, like the British historian Raphael Samuel suggests. Describing “retrochic” (a broad wave of tendencies including new-age mysticism, as well as restoration of old houses and retro fashion), the Marxist Samuel sees these practices as pioneering an alternative, non-hierarchical history based on modern materiality: “It seems possible that retrochic may have similarly prepared the way for a whole new family of alternative histories, which take as their starting point the bric-a-bric of material culture, the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life” (Samuel 1994, 114).

## What past?

In *Reappraisals, reflections on the forgotten twentieth century* (2008) British historian Tony Judt has described our memorialization of the recent past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “strikingly selective,” mainly centered around two forms: “either avowedly nostalgio-triumphalist – praising famous men and celebrating victories, or else, and increasingly, opportunities for the acknowledgement and recollection of selective suffering” (Judt 2008, 3-4). The latter has especially dominated our perception of the past, telling us to take the past exclusively as a warning lesson. As a consequence:

The twentieth century is thus on the path of becoming a moral memory palace: a pedagogically serviceable Chamber of Historical Horrors whose way stations are labeled “Munich” or “Pearl Harbor,” “Auschwitz” or “Gulag,” “Armenia” or “Bosnia” or “Rwanda” with “9-11” as a sort of supererogatory coda, a bloody postscript for those who would forget the lessons of the century or who never properly learned them. The problem with this lapidary representation of the last century as a uniquely horrible time from which we now, thankfully emerged is not the description – the twentieth century was in many ways a truly awful era, an age of brutality and mass suffering perhaps unequaled in the historical record. The problem is the message: that all of that is now behind us, that its meaning is clear, and that we may now advance – unencumbered by past errors – into a different and better era.

(Judt 2008, p. 4)

This insufficient perception of the past does not “enhance our appreciation and awareness of the past,” and, even worse, it encourages a view on the past through the particular vectors of specific groups’ sufferings. There is no “common past,” but only a mosaic of fragments of separate pasts, each of them marked by its own distinctive and assertive victimhood (ibid.). According to Judt, this tendency of viewing the past contributes to the loss of community of the welfare state – which was also an important creation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As observed in Chapter 3, the field of cultural memory studies has also had a tendency to focus on “selective sufferings” and represent the past as a “Chamber of Historical Horrors,” through a predominant focus on the memory of war and

atrocities, with the Holocaust and the Second World War as points of reference. This focus is even globalized as the right way to deal with the past in memory's "global age," where memory and history have become key political concerns, though in a stratified way, as Huyssen observes.

From this perspective, retro obviously forms an alternative take on the past through its focus on the decidedly civil everyday and popular culture. Even though it has a light-hearted and fun tone, I will state that retro pinpoints and debates a central and formative aspect of the past: Western postwar society and its popular modernity. Here, the modern experience was *materialized* in the everyday surroundings to a much higher degree than in the pre-WWII years. The "Populuxe" aesthetics described by Hine expresses how the American 1950s and 1960s created a *modern* that is different from modernist high culture: the "material golden age" of early consumer society, which meant an unprecedented amount of new things for an unprecedented number of people. This included new media and cultural forms such as TV, rock'n'roll music, and the popular notion of "youth culture." As Sprengler notes, this era was also the first to document itself through these new media (in TV-series, magazines, pop songs, etc.), thus creating a recognizable image of "Fiftiesness" itself. This is of course mythologized in the images of the Fifties described in Chapter 4, which have drawn different essences out of the era, and used in different contexts in the present cultural landscape.

From this principal form, retro has been developed to reflect and focus on local specificities and special cases. The cases of Montreal and Berlin reflect this. Not only are present materials used and sought-after for their distinctive character, but the retro practices seek to investigate how and why the periods were so important. In Montreal, the retro Fiftiesness and Sixtiesness focused on Quebec's late and abrupt entry into modernity, and on the complex relation between cultural influences and hierarchies. And in Berlin, Ostalgie retro explored the other modernity of the GDR in a way that official musealizations had not been able to. These places are renowned cultural centers known for their retro scenes, but I will claim that retro is always practiced in a specific context and reflects a specific configuration of objects and symbols. From the case studies and their focus on the past, I will draw two concluding statements:

- 1) Retro should be seen as including a considerable amount of historical mapping and examining recognition of the era's often disregarded material. Retro has pioneered the aesthetic recognition of the now popular Mid-century modern design, brutalist architecture (even including GDR *Plattenbau*), and countless popular cultural

phenomena. It overlaps with the more established historicizing practices, such as the many books like Hine's *Populuxe*, among others, appearing in the late 1980s, and museum exhibitions, and even cultural festivals dedicated to the recent past. In this way, retro is not just a popular cliché in contrast to the reflected historiographical image. Retro culture does not "need a history lesson" as Jameson and Lippard state – it *is* a history lesson, contributing knowledge of the past and even discussing how the past relates to the present.

2) Retro shows an increasing awareness of the specificities of modern culture. It is not just directed towards one image of, for example, *Fiftiesness*, but reflects local and regional characteristics and specific configurations of modern culture, as analyzed in the cases of Montreal and Berlin. Here, retro contributes actively to the acknowledgement of specific versions of the modern and its role in contemporary identity.

By turning the original forward-lookingness of the typical retro objects into dated markers, retro displays *the modern* as past and can thus be viewed as a memory of the modern, or rather, a specific phase of the modern. This requires a few comments on how the modern is perceived today in the post-postmodern present, where the ideas of *the postmodern* as well as *the modern* are equally questioned. There is a remarkable tendency to rethink, or at least re-coin these terms. For example, curator Nicolas Bourriaud has promoted the term *Altermodern* to fill out the "void after postmodernism" with "a synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism" (Bourriaud 2009, 12).<sup>112</sup> Based on the Latin *alter*: "other," the term stresses "otherness" and "a multitude of possibilities, of alternatives to a single route" (Ibid.) (as those of modernism and postmodernism). Famously, Bruno Latour has stated that *We have never been modern* (Latour 1993), questioning the self-understanding of "modern" science and its distinctions between culture and nature, and between human and thing. *The modern*, it appears to Latour, is actually a matter of faith of those who claim to be modern, and has not been a general reality. In his newest book, *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns* (2013), Latour examines the modern again. This time staged as an anthropological study – not of the primitive non-moderns made by modern

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<sup>112</sup> *Altermodern* was used as the title for the Tate Triennale exhibition in 2009 curated by Bourriaud and is explained in an essay in the accompanying catalogue. Seemingly, Bourriaud had used the term before at some occasions.

anthropological scientists – but of *the Modern* as a foreign culture itself. There is obviously a status as past attributed to modernity (or, when we thought we were modern) in this approach, but also an attempt to reassess modernity and rethink what it really was, and what it might be today. This could be applied as an agenda for retro culture's take on modernity. One of retro's avatars could be the anthropologist observing the “incredibly strange” Moderns. But retro also constructively rethinks the Modern through the above mentioned two points. For example, modernist culture is associated with the opposition of high arts and popular culture. Retro obviously reassesses this not very durable separation.

The same goes for the universality of “the modern.” The modern, modernism, and modernity have paradigmatically been identified with Western culture's promotion as universal and univocal – a view which is arguably the most heavily stated objection against the modern in a post-colonial age of globalism. But modernity is increasingly seen as containing different perspectives and localities, for example by Arjun Appadurai. Appadurai has stated that Western thinking on modernity has been focused on the idea of “some single moment – call it the modern moment – that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present” (Appadurai 1996, 3). Often, this break is set between tradition and modernity, and marks the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies. Appadurai wants to modify this thinking, showing the continuous “production of locality” in the modern world, and “modernity at large,” as being produced in many versions globally, reminiscent of Eisenstadt's “multiple modernities.” The contemporary world is determined by *circulation* with the “mobile texts” of electronic media and the various forms of migration of people as its most defining features. This speeds up the “production of locality,” which is a feature throughout human history, as “human beings exercise their social, technical, and imaginative capacities, including the capacity for violence, warfare, and ecological selfishness, they literally produce environments within which they function, including the biological and physical nature of these environments.” (Appadurai 2010, 9) In a world where “[c]ultural objects including images, languages, and hairstyles now move ever more swiftly across regional and national boundaries” (Appadurai 2010, 4), localities are “temporary negotiations between various globally circulating forms” (Appadurai 2010, 12). Locality is produced in the circulation of cultural objects and stories, in a similar vein to Löfgren's “thickenings of belonging,” through the distribution of modern culture. Retro could obviously be seen as “producing locality,” especially as responding to the historical geographies of Quebec Fiftiesness and Eastern Berlin Seventiesness. The “modern” era produced locality in Montreal, as

does retro culture today. I have called this process the “accents of retro” describing the local adaption and usage of the generally distributed language of the popular trend. The accents of retro reflect, I will claim, the multiplicity of the modern, and the importance of “obstacles, roadblocks, and traffic jams” (ibid.) in the global traffic of flows and circulation to which Appadurai calls attention.

### **Roads ahead: Retro for the future?**

If retro is focused on a specific era and its media and material culture, what are we to make of it for the future? After having expanded the horizon of what the Fifties were – in general and specific contexts – how can we use retro? Of course, this is not to be answered by an academic study, but by the cultural practices themselves in the future. If retro is still being practiced, it will produce relevance, and, as mentioned, there are no signs of a receding popularity.

To a certain extent, retro has grown towards the traditional categories of antiques and the *classic* and *classy*. The historical recognition and categorization, the aesthetic qualification, and, not least, the escalated price level of many retro objects seem to place them alongside *art nouveau* objects, Bauhaus design, Chippendale furniture, etc., which form a canon of evergreens. The advanced years of the 1950s themselves has made them *vintage* in the most conventional sense, it could easily be said. One should, however, be careful with such cultural generalizations. Even though “new” decades like the 1970s, 1980s, and even the 1990s have been drawn into the retro category, retro has been concerned with the 1950s since the 1970s as a primary object, and is not simply “moving on” in a cyclic regularity. A category such as antiques is arguably also culturally specific, concerning the objects of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is based on crafts objects that are different from the mass-produced modern objects of retro. While there might be some overlap with categories such as antiques, I will propose that retro be recognized as a category in itself as the primary “home” of post-WW2 popular modern objects. 1950s and 1970s objects will not be distributed in a hodgepodge as much as in the distinct and recognizable category of retro (whatever name it take on). In short, the era of retro will remain distinct and recognizable, and will possibly be in demand. As Stanley states, the rich material of post-war modernity is a resource for discoveries and curations for the future generations.

These discoveries and curations will, I presume, include the easily identifiable as well as specific versions and other “moderns.” Like the historical rendition Chapter 4 showed, the retro images of the 1950s have developed a lot, and they have brought different entities into the category of “Fiftiesness.” This will of course continue: examples of retro culture from the 1980s appear with a distinct *Eightiesness* to us, and our retro culture today and its images of the 1950s will signal our ‘re’-decade for posterity.

Like memory studies has stressed, our experience of the present is very dependent on our knowledge of the past, and on which pasts we are able to connect to our present (Connerton 1989). In the whole retro age since the 1970s, where our cultural focus shifted from the “present futures” to “present pasts,” it seems we are only able to connect with the recent past. Arguably, the roots of the new will be searched, like in the current interest for retro gaming and vintage computers. For example, early mobile devices and 1990s web design will have a distinct materiality and gain interest as background for the present.

It is an undoubted fact that the future will be characterized by changes and accelerated development, and that this will be very much felt in the everyday thing-world and cultural forms. Maybe the experience will be of a “hyper-stasis,” as Reynolds suggests, in a “combination of speed and standstill.” Here, I will suggest, retro offers a credible stance: it simultaneously confirms and contests the modern, and, not least, does so in a fun way.

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Bob Stanley's blog: <http://croydonmunicipal.blogspot.co.uk/>

James Lileks' webpage: <http://www.lileks.com/>

Yesterland: <http://www.yesterland.com/>

Scandinavian Retro (formerly Hus & Hem Retro): <http://www.scandinavianretro.com/>

Mister Retro: [www.misterretro.com](http://www.misterretro.com)

Blog on retro culture in architecture and cityscapes:

<http://arkfo.dk/da/blog/writer/Kristian%20Handberg>

Facebook community Weird Retro: <https://www.facebook.com/weirdretro?fref=ts>

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*Rockabilly 514* (movie, 86 min., 2008). Feature documentary by Patricia Chica and Mike Wafer.

*Lost Neighborhoods/Quartiers disparus*, Temporary Exhibition 2011-2013 at the Centre d'histoire Montréal, 335 place d'Youville, Montreal Quebec.

([http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?\\_pageid=8757,97685570&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=8757,97685570&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL))

Mucho Gusto Records (<http://muchogustorecords.com/>)

#### **Shops**

Cul-de-Sac, 3966 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec.

Friperie St-Laurent, 3976 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec.

Kitsch 'n' Swell, 3972 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec (<http://kitschnswell.ca/en.html>).

Montrealité, 3960 Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec (<http://www.montrealite-tshirts.com/>)

Rokokonut, 3972, Boulevard Saint-Laurent, Montreal, Quebec.

Cité Déco Meubles, 1761 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec (<http://www.redesignmobilier.com>)

Jack's Objets et Mobiliers Moderne de XXe Siècle, 1883 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.

(<http://www.jacks70.com>)

Le 1863, 1863 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.

Mtlmodern, 1851 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.

PEI Mobilier Moderne 20e Siècle, 1023 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal Quebec.

Re Design 1699 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.

Seconde Chance, 1691 Rue Amherst, Montreal, Quebec.

Marina Vintage Style Boutique & Pinup Photography 1331 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal Quebec

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#### **Events:**

Old Wig Vintage Fair October 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> 2012, Bain Mathieu, 2915 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal Quebec.

Rock around the Broc (Rockabilly concert and fashion fair) October 27<sup>th</sup> 2012, 425 Beaubien, Montreal Quebec.

Concert: Bloodshot Bill + Capitol Tease Burlesque + Lyse and the Hot Kitchen, La Salla Rossa, November 23<sup>th</sup>, 4848 Boulevard St. Laurent.

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Haus der Geschichte, Sclossstrasse 6, Lutherstadt Wittenberg. <http://www.pflug-ev.de/>  
Alltag der DDR, Dauerausstellung von Haus der Geschichte in Museum der Kulturbrauerei,  
Knaackstrasse 97, Berlin. <http://www.hdg.de/berlin/museum-in-der-kulturbrauerei/ausstellungen/dauerausstellung/>

Ostel. Das DDR Hostel, Wriezener Karree 5, Berlin. <http://www.ostel.eu/>

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Intershop 2000, Danecker Strasse 8, Berlin. <http://www.intershop2000.com/>

Ostpaket, Spandauer Strasse 2, Berlin. <http://www.ostpaket-berlin.de/>

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# Resumé

## There's no time like the past – Retro som kulturel erindring

Projektet definerer *retro*: den bevidste revival af æstetiske og kulturelle træk fra den nære fortid som et væsentligt og specifikt kendetegn for det 20. og 21. århundredes kultur. Dette udbredte fænomen i samtidskulturen tydeliggøres som baseret på erfaring af materialitet og som en kulturel erindringsform. Bag dette ligger et opgør med den refleksmæssige læsning af retro som en dybdeløs og inferiør omgang med historien entydigt samhørende med 1980'ernes postmodernisme. I stedet ses retro som konsekvent fokuseret på en særlig historisk epoke (oftest fra 1950 til 1980), som baseret på specifikke objekter og altid som udøvet i en specifik kulturel kontekst, hvor retro-dyrkelsen ofte fremhæver særlige varianter, konstellationer og "accenter" af moderne kultur. Således er retro baseret på en oplevelse af den moderne materialitet og dens forandringer og udtrykker en ny æstetisk opmærksomhed på den moderne populær- og hverdagskultur og dens tingslighed. I dette ligger en *musealisering* af den nære fortid og en blanding af det historiske, det æstetiske og det farverigt underholdende. Forhold, som generelt karakteriserer samtidens "historieboom", hvor fortiden oplevses overalt i kulturen. En tilstand som retro både kan ses som et udtryk for og et ironisk modsvar til.

Projektet beskriver kulturhistorien for begrebet "retro" og diskuterer særlig dets nye popularitet, hvor retro-dyrkelsen både er populært tilgængelig og stadigt mere specialiseret. En teoretisk og metodisk baggrund sættes op gennem diskussioner af materiel kultur og den nye interesse i *materialitet*, relevante kulturbegreber og -teorier, og *cultural memory studies*. Som en særlig case gennemgås 1950'erne som objekt for retrodyrkelse fra 1970'erne til i dag. Denne historiske gennemgang analyserer hvordan forskellige essenser af "Fiftiesness" er blevet skabt som materialiseringer af årtiet som en gennemgående kerne i retrodyrkelsen med den aktuelle popularitet som et klimaks. Retros rolle som kulturel erindring analyseres mere detaljeret gennem to stedsspecifikke case-studier baseret på research af retrokultur i Montreal, Canada og Berlin, Tyskland. Begge steder er kendte for deres livlige retroscener og kendetegnes af dramatisk moderne historie, som er definerende for den kulturelle identitet og erindring. Analyserne viser, hvorledes retropraksisserne aktivt reflekterer denne baggrund og bidrager til den kulturelle erindring ved at kortlægge den moderne kultur og dens tingverden som en alternativ erindringsform. Dette perspektiveres i det konkluderende kapitels diskussion af den moderne kulturs specificitet og produktion af lokalitet og af det modernes erindring.



# Abstract

## **There's no time like the past – Retro between memory and materiality in contemporary culture**

The project defines *retro*: the revival of aesthetic and cultural features of the recent past as a hallmark of late the 20<sup>th</sup> century's culture and that of today, and analyzes this important phenomenon in the contemporary within a cultural memory setting. The project argues with the reading of retro as a depthless and inferior practice associated with 1980s postmodernism, and suggests seeing retro as consequently focused on a specific timespan (usually from 1950 to 1980), as being based on specific objects, and always as being practiced in specific contexts and often expressing the particular varieties and “accents” of modern culture. As such, retro is based upon an experience of the modern materiality and its changes, and expresses a new awareness of the everyday culture and its thing-world. Retro implies a musealization of the recent past, and performs a merging of the historical, the aesthetic and the entertainment – elements which are typical for the contemporary History Boom – to which retro also works as a critical counter movement. The project describes the cultural history of the term, and discusses its new popularity in the very present. A theoretical and methodological background is set up through discussions of material culture studies and the new interest in the theory of materiality, relevant concepts of culture, and cultural memory studies.

At this background retro is approached through a case study of the 1950s as subject to retro culture from the 1970s to today. This historical rendition analyzes how different essences of the era have been chosen, and how *materializations* of “Fiftiesness” have been at the core of retro with the current popularity as a climax. To explore retro's role as cultural memory in detail, the project includes two case studies based on field research of retro practices in Montreal, Canada and Berlin, Germany - locations known for their rich retro scenes as well as a cultural context formed through a dramatic modern history. The analysis shows how the retro culture actively reflects this background and plays a distinct role in the cultural memory. By mapping new sides of modern culture retro forms an alternative memory beside the official musealizations and memory culture. The final concluding chapter puts these specified analyses of retro in perspective by discussing modern culture's specificity and production of locality and the memory of the Mid-century Modern.